

ANGEL AND THE FLYING WARHORSES

By

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Chapter One

Olandian medical ship

Dandrovian moon

434 years after the colonization of Olandia

Angeni Traek looked out the Sanctuary's porthole window into the night and waited. She'd heard a man's shout of frustration and pain. Telepathically.

Her head still ached with the sound echoes.

"Missing the children, Prime Healer?"

Angeni jumped, startled by the voice from behind her.

She turned to see Sidra, the medical ship's new-tech, humanoid office robot. Sidra referred to her work with genetically injured children.

"Always," she said. Why trouble Sidra with the whole truth, that she'd heard a wounded man's shout. That she knew he was on his way to them now.

"I'm sure the little ones are in good hands on Olandia." Sidra took pride in knowing the details of the staff's lives.

"Yes, they're fine. Fine. I check in by holovid often."

"Excellent."

"A world without children has little hope for the future," Angeni mused.

Sidra's gaze followed hers outward. "Dandrovian moon was chosen for its convenient nexus in Alliance space. An efficient port for Sanctuary. Not it's hope for the future."

"True," Angeni agreed. The temporary home to their hospital ship was stark, a landscape of rocks and little more.

“The duration of your volunteering on the Sanctuary nears an end. You will be free to return home.”

“Yes.”

“You must rest now.”

Angeni shook her head slowly. “No. A rescue shuttle just flew into port.” Deep under the moon’s surface, were tracks for launching and landing hyperspeed ships. Dandrovia’s beacons lit the entries cut in the rocks just enough that she could see the shuttle.

Sidra’s eyes flashed alarm. “You are positive?”

“The markings were clear—”

“Your replacement should be here. You are much too tired for more work tonight. I will find...” Sidra rushed down the corridor, her movements quick and agitated. Angeni turned to watch her leave.

Alert sirens blared. Just as Angeni expected. And dreaded. She closed her eyes a moment. Determined, she faced the entrance squarely, her white robes floated about her legs as she turned.

The doors swooshed open. A medical robot with angular features, older technology than Sidra, stepped through the door. No attempt at human looks had been made with him. He moved with an awkward and lumbering gait. An integrated medical stretcher cantilevered behind him.

Isak, a young technician, rode a platform at the rear. Lights indicated the machine worked to stabilize an unconscious patient.

The man she’d heard.

“This one’s bad, Prime Healer Angeni, real bad,” Isak said, his expression tense and pained. “Won’t make it.” He lifted his gaze to hers, his eyes darkened by sadness. “He’s Alliance Guard.”

She glanced sharply to Isak, then back to the patient. She checked the prone man’s vitals, recalibrating the robot just to be sure. Her fingers flew over the control pad.

Fatigue was forgotten as adrenaline flooded her bloodstream. The wounded man's dark hair was matted, his handsome face abraded and cut.

“Alliance Guard? How—”

“A special operations team chasing smugglers in the swamps of Gandos tonight.”

The Sanctuary did not treat many of the Guard. More often their opposition.

“We owe the Guard a great debt,” she whispered.

“Sure do,” Isak said with great admiration. He automatically adjusted the angle of the gurney. “Guard slips in and out most anywhere unnoticed. Keep the bad guys under control.”

“Yes.”

“He's too still and pale,” Isak said.

“Internal bleeding. What time did this happen?” But she knew. She'd looked at her chronometer when she'd first heard this man's shout.

Isak gave her the approximate time. Right. She calculated how much time she had to find the bleeding and stop it. She must hurry.

“Almost didn't find him. The swamp mud would've sucked him down soon. Then even this pretty chunk of deplex here couldn't have dragged him out.” The tech gave a flat-handed pat to the machine.

“Did he fall?” she asked.

“Judging from the position of his one-man floater—crashed to bits against a rock ledge above him, I'd say—yes.”

“Can we raise the tourniquet pressure?” She could well imagine the damage the newest illegal weapons the smugglers used could cause, even without a direct hit. “The damage must be reversed.”

“Sure.”

“Quick. I’ll do the chest. You the legs.”

The tech rushed to do as she asked. She watched his actions and duplicated them. Usually best to leave the machines to the tech, but she could not afford the courtesy today.

Her patient was large size with proud bearing. She touched his arm, feeling for his pulse. Against all odds, at the pressure of her hand, his eyes flashed open. He jerked, pulling against the restraints holding him to the gurney. He twisted his hand from her grasp and grabbed her forearm. The heat of his touch flowed through her.

Who ... are you?

Angeni gasped at the words, not spoken in the conventional way. The broken sentence in a rumbling masculine voice lingered in her mind. The same voice she heard earlier. She glanced over to the tech to be sure. Busy at his task, Isak showed no sign of hearing anything.

The man on the gurney looked down to where he held her arm in his tight grasp. Her hands trembled.

Pretty as an angel. Golden hair and amber eyes.

The power of his penetrating masculine gaze shocked her. Slowly, his thick-lashed, dark blue eyes closed once again. His hand dropped from her arm.

She tried for an answering telepathic message. She struggled to find a pathway to reach his thoughts again.

Hang on for me. “Hang on,” she whispered aloud.

May the Founder’s Saints help her, she’d only communicated this way with animals. His brain waves ... infrasonic waves or whatever she received, were jagged, more complex and threadier than any she’d ever experienced. No doubt the axons carrying the brain impulses from neuron to neuron were stretched by the trauma of concussion, garbling the messages yet making them more intense.

You spoke in my head, Angel. His words held a measure of natural disbelief.

Never mind that now.

Dying.

Just hang on to your life a little longer. Please. So we can help you. She continued to struggle to communicate, *I sense your strength. You must tell me where you're hurt. You can do it.* She made an effort to pour strength and energy to him along the psychic pathway. She'd heard legends of primitive practitioners who used telepathy to heal and to ease pain. To her surprise, she felt a drain. Her mind was on fire now. She rubbed her painful temples.

Can't. Don't know how. He tried to smile.

She smoothed the man's forehead, brushing back the long black hair, being careful to avoid his cuts. *You must.*

The tech was observing her behavior with a wary look.

With the return of her touch, the guard's pulse grew steadier on the monitor. Good. She felt the urge to pat the ugly machine herself as Isak had done seconds ago. In all ways, the machine was better at this work than a fallible healer, especially one with too little sleep. Time. Time was their enemy.

However, many things the robot could not do. Angeni's stomach grew tight as she felt uncertainty and doubt swamp her, the like of which she had not felt since the early days of medical training.

"Do your job, Prime Healer," she said aloud, clasping her own hand at his wrist to stop its tremor.

"The guardsman's good as gone, ma'am," the tech said. "Even my robot buddy here can't save him now. Look at the vitals drop. Blasted shame, terrible waste. Nuisance smugglers."

Angeni shook her head again. "No," she growled. *Hang on, Guardsman. Can you hear me? You cannot die. No. By the Founders' God above us... I won't allow it.* "I won't allow it," she whispered.

"Yes, ma'am," the tech answered, his puzzlement showing on his face.

As if at her words, the guard's vital signs improved. Angeni stiffened her posture. She could keep talking to him in this fashion if needed. Anything to keep him alive.

She leaned close. "I will not let you go."

My heart. He answered her question at last. ***Something damn big is leaking, Angel.***

Angeni exhaled a sigh of great relief. He'd just made her job easier, possible even. *Thank you. You've helped more than you can know.*

This man would not see real angels tonight, if she could prevent it.

Chapter Two

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Four hours later, Angeni completed the last fine sutures. All sources of the guardsman's bleeding had been dealt with. She placed both hands on the gurney and leaned in for momentary support, then dropped her head.

Her replacement, Healer Froton Warrick, a man of more brag than healing skills stared at her from across the robotic table.

"I must admit you gave this man a chance at life, Angeni," he said with grudging stiffness.

She cringed at his use of her first name in such a familiar way.

Warrick patted his fine blonde hair into place.

"I must say, I was impressed when you went right for his heart," he went on, not at all

bothered that she had not spoken. “This barbarian’s extreme fitness masked the leak. Most physicians would not have suspected. If any of us have the true mystical powers of a primitive healer, it might be you.”

“Thank you, Healer Warrick.” She knew he was not sincere in his rare praise.

She took the controls of the gurney robot once again.

“Call a tech,” Warrick said in disgust, his hand stilling her arm, the pressure of his fingers hurt. She jerked away and kept going.

“You waste your time,” he called after her.

As she came through the doors, Isak, who had apparently waited by Sidra’s desk, turned and started toward her. “How is he, Healer? How’s our guard?” He looked down to the patient. “They’re saying you saved him.”

“He’s stable for now, Isak.” She grinned at him tiredly. “I thank you for the help of your gurney bot. You keep this machine in superior order.” She swayed a bit.

“Let me help you, ma’am. I’ll settle him in his room.”

“Yes, thank you. I’ll go with you.”

He raised a brow, then nodded.

Sidra joined them, striding along behind, fussing. “You must rest, Prime Healer. You are pale and weak.”

“Thank you for your concern. Could you have a sleeping cot brought to his room for me?”

The bot stopped and shook her head. “Highly irregular.”

“Yes, it is indeed, but you can do it, correct?” Angeni tried for her best bossy tone and stare.

Sidra inclined her head formally, looking oddly wounded that her sound advice was ignored. “Healer Warrick will complain.”

“Let him.”

“Isak, we’ll take him to the room with the atrium windows and garden.”

Sidra stopped again. “Oh, but that room is reserved for influential people, Alliance chancellors, dignitaries,” she said.

“An Alliance guardsman is influential enough to keep us all alive,” Angeni snapped.

“Of course he is, Prime Healer. Of course. As you say.” Sidra agreed, humoring her no doubt.

In the large room, she and Isak shifted their patient to the bed with a lifting help from the bot. The hospital bed was much larger, but matched Isak’s robot in many ways. The footboard was an integrated life-support monitor. The bed foam would keep his circulation at peak. The next twenty-four hours would be long ones for the guardsman. Providing the illusion of a garden, a holo display was accented with a smattering of real plants and flowers.

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A few hours later, sleeping lightly on the cot, Angeni was awakened by the guardsman’s restless motion. In spite of his restraints, he systematically tried to free himself of his tubes and leads.

“Stop. You must not do that.” He persisted. Desperate, she tried a mental communication. *No. You cannot do that. You will harm yourself.* “You will undo all my hard work,” she whispered. At her words, he relaxed and fell back to sleep.

After the third repetition of the restlessness and her reassurance, she simply moved from her cot and lay down beside him and held him close. He must stay quiet. The fragile equipment would not withstand his relentless assaults. She’d never experienced a patient so determined to escape.

“Your first time in a hospital, hmmm?” she whispered before falling asleep again. She thought she heard, ever so faint in her mind. Angel.

Two days later, Angeni stood by the guardsman's hospital bed as he slept. The monitor lights were steady and normal now. The restraints at his arms were more comfortable than the ones on the gurney. He tested them all the same.

You must be still.

The man tolerated his pain well. Her heart twisted and she smiled. He did not even moan in his sleep. He merely tried to evade the restraints and medical equipment with persistent determination.

Even now, he flexed his arms. And his legs were often moving, even in sleep. She stepped closer and covered his hand with her own. Just as on the first night and every time since, her presence and mental communications soothed him when pain meds did not.

She took his large hand in hers. *I'm here with you, Garek. Captain Sahnjun. Sleep.* She knew his name now. She'd read it from the identification information on a records device.

He seemed to go quiet and breathe easier, listening.

Not even his Alliance team had been in to see him. The rumor was they were still fighting desperately in the swamps.

Her heart told their telepathic connection meant something earth shaking. Her practical nature urged sensible caution.

"Love is truest, when known at first sight," she whispered, quoting the scholar Venforin, who lived over one hundred years after the loss of Olandia's ship. She smiled at her whimsy, settling into the chair across from him to watch the steady rise and fall of his chest.

Reassured he was well, Angeni began to go over her files.

"Get some rest, Healer." The masculine voice pulled her attention from the records. She raised her eyes to the man in the bed across from her. Heavens, he'd turned his head and was staring at her. His alert blue-eyed gaze was a powerful thing to see, like the blue ice on the Snow Mountains of Clarine.

"Every time I've awakened, you've been here. Do you not sleep?" He paused and

frowned thoughtfully. “Or, was I dreaming?”

She dropped her eyes and fussed with the work in her lap, embarrassed to be found out. “No, you weren’t dreaming, Captain. I did not realize you were awake during the past two days.”

“Garek, call me Garek. I was awake at times. Barely. In and out. Many details are less than clear.”

“How do you feel?”

“Sore as hell,” he answered, his gaze still fiercely watching her.

She smiled. “I’m sure you understate the matter.”

“I do,” he admitted with a flashing grin of white, even teeth. He sucked in a breath as if the movement of the smile was too much. He kicked the sheet off his leg in frustration, then groaned in pain.

Stubborn-headed male. A handsome leg it was, all muscled and sprinkled nicely with masculine hair. She looked away.

“You must be still.”

“I figured that out.”

Tears of joy gathered behind her eyes at the knowledge he was well enough to speak to her at last. More—she was overjoyed his words made good sense, no memory loss. There were no lingering problems from his head injury.

“Did you sing to me, Angel?” he asked softly, his eyes piercing her.

Her cheeks flushed. “Um ... yes, well, a little...”

“Beautiful. Haunting. Brought to mind pastures and water, soothing places.” He looked embarrassed to have revealed as much.

She touched her throat with a fluttering hand. “Yes, well ... good then.” She brought her hands to her lap and clasped them together. The Aldorian healing chants her

mother taught her were not a part of the normal repertoire for an Olandian scientist and physician. If he mentioned this to the staff, it might lead to uncomfortable questions.

“What is your real name?” he asked.

“Angeni,” she answered automatically.

He chuckled. Then winced in pain.

“If I am not mistaken, Angeni means angel in some language. So, your parents sensed your true nature as I did, hmmm, Angel?”

She just stared for a moment, helpless, fascinated. “Yes. The original language of the name is lost in history, but not the meaning. Celestial, guardian being.” It suddenly struck her that she missed hearing his thoughts today. Would he bring up the subject of their mental communication? Would he even remember it?

His voice sounded every bit the same as the telepathic communication they’d shared. She would have recognized it anywhere. She’d known she could not have imagined such a wonderfully masculine attribute. She should not be so surprised its timbre caressed her body when he laughed. Or, that it matched the one in her mind so perfectly, but she was surprised and overjoyed.

“Where are you from, Captain?” She made a desperate effort to return her mind to a professional footing. His steely gaze caught hers and held as a pause lengthened. She wondered if he’d answer her.

“Clothoes planet. One of the ancients, an ocean planet.”

He’d pronounced it Klotoes.

“A natural planet then?”

He smiled a weak and lop-sided grin. “All too natural at times, I’m afraid, Healer. Far different from your sterile and climate-controlled Olandia. Ceremonies on horseback. Feudal domains. Cave-dwellings. Ancient swords, leather leggings. The primitive works.”

Her pride smarted some at the designation of Olandia as sterile, but it was the truth.

“Clothoes has a glorious history, I’m sure. I shall try to remember from my school days. Clothoes is matriarchal in political structure, is it not?”

He lifted his head. “Right, women rule Clothoes. Being a woman, the women ruling the world part would interest you.” He smiled with the words.

“A fascinating adaptive development to be sure,” she said. “The women hold all official positions?”

“Not all. Most.” He grinned before continuing, “Men control the dirty jobs like security and sanitation.”

“That seems unfair.”

He inclined his head in agreement with her statement. “Clothoes is far from modern.”

“Clothoes is wealthy because of the frugal nature of her women.” He dropped his head to the wedge-shaped, adjustable pillow. “Saints, I’m tired.”

“Yes, the effort of speaking has tired you. It’s enough to start. We’ll get you up and around tomorrow. You will be fine now.” Relief flooded her and she smiled.

Like it when you smile, he communicated as he closed his eyes.

Chapter Three

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A few days later, Garek rested in the atrium. He ached from a grueling physical therapy session just completed.

A tech walked in, a man with the build of youth.

“How are you, Captain?” he asked.

“Good, thanks.” No need to trouble the man with a list of his aches and pains.

“Name’s Isak.” The other man offered his hand. He took it. The younger man’s handshake was firm and confident.

“I brought you in, sir. Just wanted to check on you. First time I’ve been back to Dandrovica in days.”

“Good to meet you, Isak. The staff told me about you. Said no one else could have dragged me out of there. Said the improvements you’ve made to your gurney bot played a big part. You’re a legend here.”

“They exaggerate.” The kid looked down at his shoes.

Garek laughed harshly. “I was there, remember?”

“Indeed, you were, sir.” Isak laughed with him and folded his hands behind his back in a formal stance. “I sure thought you were gone, Captain. Still can’t say how Prime Healer Traek managed to bring you back to the living. Good thing her replacement was late and she was still on duty that night.” He grinned sheepishly. “It was like she was waiting for you.”

Garek pondered that. Could the paranormal link they shared cause her to anticipate his dire need? Not much would surprise him now.

“I’m sure you saw the condition of my floater?” he asked, changing the subject. He didn’t want to think about his unusual connection to the healer right now.

“Not much left of it, sir.”

“Not surprising. Blasted it out from under me with a Zoni laser.”

The tech gasped. “New tech. That explains a lot. Damn wonder you’re alive, sir.”

“Yes.”

“They say the healer still watches out for you.”

Garek grimaced. He suspected the kid had half a crush on Angeni, judging from the light in his eyes. “Nags me to rest. Then she nags me to keep moving with the same single-mindedness of a Blemian turtle headed for the sea.”

Isak laughed. “I suppose she does.” He looked around him. “Never been in this atrium before. It’s nice. Makes a person feel alive.

“Yes.”

“The healer insisted we settle you in the room off the atrium.”

“Against the rules for just anyone?”

“Yes sir, a few rules were bent to put you in here.”

“I wondered how I earned such a prime spot.”

“The healer says Olandia makes a good trade with the Alliance, med services for protection. She appreciates your value as a Guardsman.”

Garek nodded, not sure he wanted the woman’s gratitude.

“What do you know of the Alliance’s progress on Gandos, Isak?”

“They’re nearing completion of the mission, I hear. Making legends of themselves, fighting back a triad of Aldorian warlords.”

“Aldorian?” Garek sat up straighter in his chair. He pictured the ship he’d gotten a glimpse of that night, an artist’s rendering of three white horses, in hitch, on the side. An old mother earth symbol, for a Triad alliance. His head injury must have wiped it from his memory until now.

“Right.”

“Too far from their usual territory. Aldorian involvement explains why smugglers would have expensive laser weapons.”

“Not normal smugglers. I guess the Alliance knows better now. The Aldorians fight among themselves these days. For women and resources, like wild dogs for scraps. Old blood-alliances are broken, new ones forming. This Triad is a new link. They say the young Reihl Samaras is one of the three.”

“I’ve heard of him.”

At that moment, Sidra bustled in, fussing and posturing at Garek’s being disturbed. Garek noticed the robot was strangely pretty. Something did not ring right to his Alliance guard instincts. She bent to set down a tray and he saw it. A pulse beat at her neck.

“You will not disturb the Captain, Isak,” she ordered, her tone stern.

Garek shook his head. The bot, the woman, rather, meant well. Hard to keep it in mind at times like this. “Isak’s just keeping me company. No harm done.” Why a human would hide as a bot was a mystery, but it would not be the first time he’d heard of the deception. He would have the Alliance investigators look into her history.

“You still need your rest.”

Angeni came through the atrium’s arch, her robes floating with her graceful steps. “She’s right, Captain. Don’t overdo it, Isak. It’s so good to see you.”

Garek thought the healer looked especially lovely today, different from the polished look of Sidra. To him, she was more sexual and earthy. Just to his taste.

She carried herself with an elegance that could not be taught. The flowing white robes with gold braid added to the effect.

Sunlight bounced and played in her golden hair. A flyer’s hell, he was thinking like a poet. He loved to watch her as the day progressed. First a few tendrils of her hair would escape, then they became curling coils by shift’s end. She hardly noticed as she caught them behind her ears.

He must guard his thoughts. Her gift for telepathy could reveal to her the fact that he saw her as more than his healer.

“Prime Healer. Good to see you too.” Isak nodded in deference.

“Our patient is well, is he not?” she asked.

**“It’s amazing he made it at all, ma’am. Amazing,” Isak agreed, smiling broadly.
“You’re a talented healer, I admit.”**

As Isak and Angeni chatted, and Sidra fussed about tidying the atrium of dropped leaves, Garek thought about what Isak said of the Triad. One Aldorian warlord was vicious but three in an alliance could be deadly. The presence of an Alliance officer on the Sanctuary would be a lure to any warlord trying to earn a respected kill. It was time for him to move on. He would not jeopardize the healer’s life. Or anyone else’s.

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The next morning, Garek hurriedly gathered his few possessions. Sidra paced the room, berating him for leaving too soon.

He sighed in frustration. “Robot wouldn’t need a chrono.”

That got her attention. She stared at him for a moment, expression blank, then she looked to the timepiece she had on her wrist, carefully hidden with her sleeve.

He went on, “There’s usually a display behind a bot’s eye.”

“That could prove most handy.”

He watched her. “Why do you hide?”

She shrugged. “Aldorian males are too plentiful,” she said, not bothering to lie.

He nodded his understanding. “In order to outnumber their enemy, they’ve selected for male births for years. Finally realizing women are thin on the ground, hmmm?”

“I have no wish to be a warbride.”

“Isak tells me Aldorians fight each other—near here. Led by the prince, Reihl Samaras.”

Her hand went to her throat. All pretence of mechanical movements gone now. Her eyes turned fierce. “You were fighting Aldorians and not smugglers?”

“Yes, apparently. Didn’t get a good look at them.”

“Samaras is here for me,” she whispered.

“Or me.”

“Yes. He ... they will come for both of us. You’re right; you must go quickly. And I shall leave right away. The hospital will be safer without us here.”

“I hear Healer Traek goes back to Olandia soon. Go with her. You can hide safely there. Guard her.”

“I wouldn’t endanger her?”

“Even Aldorians respect Olandia Colony. Most of the time. You’ll both be safer there.”

The buzzer at his door interrupted.

“It would be for the best,” she agreed.

“Enter,” he said in answer to the polite knock at the door.

Angeni threw open the door and strode in. “This is madness—,” she said. “You are not ready to leave.”

“Good morning, Prime Healer. I will leave you to speak to your patient,” Sidra said.

Angeni gasped through her teeth. Garek was in a full-dress Alliance uniform. Heavens, he was a handsome man with his dark hair and gorgeous blue eyes. And strong, broad shoulders and muscled hips and legs. His facial features were most compelling of all.

She forced her wayward concentration away from the man. “Sidra what is the matter?” Angeni asked. “You look troubled. Is there an emergency?”

“No. I’m trying to talk the captain out of leaving. That’s all. I will leave you to speak to him.”

When the door closed behind Sidra, Angeni said, “I always forget she’s a machine.”

“She’s very life-like,” he agreed.

“She seems agitated.”

“You’re very insightful, Healer. All is not as it seems with Sidra.”

She inclined her head. “I will keep that in mind.”

“Good.”

“As to you, you mustn’t leave here. It’s only one week after surgery and you’re up and around, walking much better than should be expected but...”

He nodded.

“The Guard officials have shown an uncommon interest in your condition. There have been many queries in recent days.”

“I regret I’ve caused you extra work,” he said.

“I did not mean that. Besides, there have been few other patients in the past days, and none with battle injuries. Whatever you and your team did in that swamp has lightened the workload of the Sanctuary considerably.”

He glanced at her. “Good to hear it.”

“You are determined to go today?”

Her strong attraction to him had yet to diminish as she’d hoped it would. If anything, it had deepened. Her crazy heart hurt that he could leave her.

His only response to her question now was finally a brief nod of acknowledgement.

She must face the fact that he did not reciprocate the deep attachment she felt for him. In the past few days, he’d treated her with respectful distance and cool eyes. She admired his courage and work ethic in facing his first painful walk about the hospital.

Now she waited for him to speak. He lifted his head from the task of collecting his meager belongings, the clothing the Alliance Guard had sent him. He turned, pinned

her with his deep blue eyes.

“I would stop you if I could,” Angeni spoke, with too much truth.

“Ma’am?” he asked, soft and firm with a bit of a growl in the words.

Heavens, she could hate it when he spoke so formally. She looked down to her toes, unable to hold his bold, questioning stare. Then she stuck her chin out and tried again, with more success. Angeni searched his eyes, and then waved a hand in search of reason. Her body was alive with her need of him. Most distracting and unprofessional. Even painful.

“Healer—”

“Captain—”

They spoke at once.

“Perhaps you do not realize how severe your injuries were?”

“I—”

She looked at his records device, which she held in her hand. “You may feel fine now. But you will need months to recover, I assure you. At least another week under the care we can provide here.” She could call security and see to it they made him go back to bed. Even as the thought formed, she knew she could not do that to his male pride.

“I’ve invested too much in you. Too much ... work,” she said briskly.

She forced herself to go on, “In surgery, I repaired both of your kidneys, patched up your stomach in too many small spots to count. So much trauma.” She sought calmness, hoping to make him see reason. “All the while fighting time and blood loss.” She’d called on every healing technique she knew. Even the ancient Aldorian prayer chants her mother had taught her, so many years ago, that she barely remembered them. And to her surprise the chants had assisted her. Somehow.

“So Isak, and everyone else, tells me,” he agreed. “I was in the by-blast of a Zoni laser, I realize I would not be alive if not for your excellent skills as a physician of the Olandian Prime Order.”

She stared, wondering what happened to the man who had talked to her in soft whispers as she'd sat in the chair by his bed.

She spoke past a lump forming in her throat, "Your injuries could pull free of the nanotube stitching matrix and bleed with too much movement."

His expression was grim as he sought her eyes with his. "Healer, I appreciate all you've done for me. Please thank your staff."

"You could thank them yourself," she snapped.

His eyes sought hers. "I regret I do not have the time to thank them all."

"I have not completed the adjustment on your knee joint. It takes time to tweak," she continued, not waiting for a response, trying again to make him see the logic of the issue. That's what a good healer should do. Not scream in frustration, or stamp her foot in disgust. She brushed back her hair. Garek was not listening to her. Angry and at the edge of desperation, for the first time in days, she tried for a telepathic message. *You must not leave.*

"I'll get the adjustments done later."

"Your injury will cause you chronic pain if you don't."

"Look, Healer, I don't mean to appear ungrateful for all you've done for me," he said. He reached out a hand to her, but dropped it back to his side abruptly. "I'm aware you saved my life."

She closed her eyes, relishing that he had called her by her name. "In some cultures a life saved is a life owned," she whispered. Heavens, she had not meant to say that.

He stared at her, hard. His eyes burned into hers. "Would you want to own a man? In some worlds men are owned by their women."

Her face flushed. "Yes, well ... no. I mean, no, I would not own a man." She was unable to hold his stare.

Garek exhaled, gathering his jagged thoughts. His heart pounded so hard in this woman's presence, that he had no blood in his brain. He rubbed the bridge of his nose.

By the Fire in space, it was there again. The feeling of being pulled into her orbit.

Her lovely face haunted him.

Her feminine scent drew him.

The force between them sparked and crackled each time they were together. Every day it grew stronger. He imagined he could see it, worse, feel it like a living, gossamer flame against his most sensitive skin.

Somehow he knew the shape of her body, as if he'd reached out and touched her, pulling her to him and holding her close in the night. At the thought of it, his hands shook and his heart thudded in an alarming rhythm.

From the first moment, he'd felt this woman's essence in his gut, curling around his insides, making a home.

Her words, flashing through his head, from the moment he'd encountered her as he was dying, added to his unease and searing awareness of her as a woman. He had no time to try to understand it all. Not with Aldorian warlords hovering nearby.

Hell, she was right; he hurt all over from his wounds. He wanted nothing more than to fall back into the bed. But he had to leave this place, this woman. Now, or he sensed he never would.

Besides the danger he could bring down upon her if he stayed one more day, he suspected he could never return to the fiancée his clan expected and needed him to wed if he stayed another day. He winced.

"What is it? You're in pain?" she asked.

He shook his head and gritted his teeth. "Nothing."

She paced before him, restless and watchful. Angry with him. He couldn't get her scent from his mind. Control. He fought for control. He was not fool enough to think another healer could've saved him. He suspected she was as much mystical healer as physician.

"You must allow me to assist you back to the bed." She stepped closer. "Now." She took his arm and the fire of her touch caused an instant masculine reaction.

He clenched his fists. His rights were tied to his home world and his people. A reluctant fiancée waited for him there.

Garek drew in a deep breath. He reached out to stroke the woman's puzzled face. She closed her lovely eyes and leaned into his palm. That small movement stopped his breathing. He stroked the shell of her dainty ear. Amazingly soft. She moaned softly. He spread his hand at the back of her head and drew her closer.

Eyes on her lips.

She took another step to him.

A good sign.

He touched her lips with his. Just a taste, he promised himself.

She threw her arms around him and kissed him back. He grinned against her lips. She had more enthusiasm than skill. He liked that. She was much too busy for regular lovers, no doubt. Slow heat engulfed him and shot straight to the center of his desire.

She pressed to him and he enfolded her tighter against the length of him. Then inched her toward the bed, sinking down with her still in his embrace.

“You will hurt yourself.” Her startled eyes told him she was beginning to think too much.

“Worth it.”

He rolled her under him and kissed her again, long and deep, exploring the welcome of her lips. Her fingers played in his hair, inciting him to more.

Her warm hands moved inside his shirt, fast and urgent. He gasped. She'd dealt with his buttons, pushing aside the fabric. His breathing sped and his control was in great danger of slipping away. “Geni,” he whispered hoarsely. She moaned and arched her neck. He couldn't resist the invitation, kissing her there.

He was awed by the perfect fit of their bodies, by the melting sensation in his bones.

He leaned back to look at her.

She opened her eyes. “Don’t go.”

“I have a fiancée awaiting my return,” he whispered, hollowly.

She said nothing. Her eyes asked questions he could not allow himself to answer. She seemed shocked, shaking her head in denial now.

“My body burns for yours, but I have no time to explore this heated sexual attraction between us,” he rasped, forcing his voice to steady, making the attraction seem less important than it really was to him.

She went stiff, lifting her stubborn chin proudly. “I have not asked you to.”

He could not prevent a grin. Not in words, he thought, but her yielding body language had spoken for her, telling him exactly what she wanted. The woman had a fierce, natural look. All golden hair, loose about her shoulders, ruffled from his hands—more lioness than heavenly spirit right now. Large, sparkling, amber eyes dared him to leave her so soon after they had found each other. The glossy, porcelain white of her skin fascinated him.

“Will your home world fall if you do not return to marry her?” she asked, sitting up on the bed.

“My world could fall back to the anarchy of civil wars among the clans if the laws are not observed, yes,” he said.

He got up off the bed, taking her with him, ignoring the pain from the action. She pulled away and blocked his exit.

He stepped to her and took hold of her upper arms. So soft. He smoothed over her skin just a light-second, then he lifted her. The surprise in her eyes almost made him laugh. Against his better judgment, and his will, he brought her close again and held her, absorbing her feminine warmth and the dizzying scent of her.

With a whimper, she melted into him. As if made to be just there.

He hugged her close a light-second, then made himself set her aside. Out of his path.

She looked away as if she would hide her face from him.

Garek forced himself to ignore the strange lurch of his heart. This woman almost brought him to his knees before her.

She turned back to face him. “You are important to your people then?”

“I am the oldest grandson of the Jona of my clan—the ruling official. She needs a female child to replace her.”

“I see.” He read hurt in her eyes. He felt empty disappointment himself.

His last few paces to the door seemed measured in soul-rending years. Best to leave her behind while he still could.

There were no real flames between them when they touched, Garek understood physics well. This was hormones or pheromones, a sexual need stronger than anything he’d ever experienced. The pull of her had a logical biochemical explanation.

By the hardest effort, he strode through the door. As it was closing between them, he smiled and tried to send her a mind message, insane as it was to do so. But he could not resist.

Goodbye, Angel.

On the other side of the closed door, Angeni gasped.

Chapter Four

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One year later

Angeni stood by the window of the conference room. Several stories below, a security guard strode with military straightness, reminding her of her captain. Over a year had passed, and yet she thought of Garek at odd times. With hope he would return to her, at first. But now with the sad fondness of an enjoyed dream. Her heart still raced a bit at the memory of their kisses the last day. The feel of his embrace. Her mind still searched for him in order to continue the telepathic connection. But there was only silence now. He'd left her. Perhaps it had all been an illusion—or, more accurately—a delusion.

Love could not run a person down in that fashion. Like an avalanche.

He would be matebonded to the fiancée by now, perhaps the father of the little girl his family needed.

The sound of a small gong brought Angeni's thoughts to the present. "By authority of the Founding Families, I call you to attention."

Prime Healer Reva Notah, walked into the room. Reva was the Chair of the Olandian Council, a distinguished scientist, and a respected member of the Alliance Science Commission. Silence fell as Healer Notah stepped to her place at the head of the table and began to speak. Angeni took her seat with the others.

All stood in respect, then returned to their seats around a white granite formal conference table. The chairs automatically adjusted to height needs, male or female, short or tall.

"Fellow Council members, we meet today to discuss further the topic of introducing the Alliance human genetic base into our population."

"Councilman Froton Warrick stood. "Who gives the ASC the right to interfere in the affairs of Olandia Colony?" Anger laced his tone. The watchful expression in his eyes made a person think of evil.

Angeni did not respect the man. Never had. Serving with him on Dandrovian outpost had reinforced her negative opinion.

"Yes, I also would like the answer to this question," Councilman Gornan Fitzmahue added with some hesitation, rubbing his thin mustache in nervous movements.

A man of low self-esteem, Fitzmahue was easily led by Warrick's stronger, more

domineering, personality. Angeni empathized with his need to fit in. He was a hard worker, not altogether unredeemable.

Reva held up a hand. “Gentlemen.” She looked exasperated. “You expressed yourselves at our last meeting quite well.” She gestured toward the window. “Change is troubling. Try to understand the sincere concern of the Alliance.”

“Such concern,” spat Warrick.

“The fact is our isolated population has reached a dangerous genetic bottleneck,” Reva said.

Warrick remained standing. “The Alliance would have our young people mated with randomly mixed offworlders.”

“And receive our healing skills in the bargain,” Councilman Fitzmahue added. He looked to Warrick for guidance and not Reva.

Warrick nodded and went on, “We could lose our women to Vandor colony, Clothoes planet, even our worst enemy, Aldor, may insist on participating. There, our young healers could be reduced to preternatural practices, herbal medicines, acupuncture, or the Founder’s Saints prevent it, healing chants. Aldor’s complaints led the Alliance to decree all doctors be referred to as healers. In concession to their primitive beliefs.

“You know Aldor left the Alliance years ago,” Reva said.

“This may bring them back.”

She tapped a gavel for order. “We are all Earthan by our roots.”

“An old argument. Little proof of that.”

“Little proof the Aldorians arose out of their second moon, as they believe, either,” Angeni interjected.

“Ahem.” Reva suppressed a smile at her comment, but her eyes twinkled. “At any rate, the ASC has modified its original proposal to accommodate the resistance it met in our society among our young people. There will only be a small, control trial at first. No one will be coerced into participating. The ASC will call it The Cultural Exchange.”

“Bah, euphemism,” came from Warrick.

“Yes. Perhaps,” she allowed. “We ask for volunteers.” Reva paused for discussion from the floor.

She went on when there were none, “The participants will be females, in view of our colony’s relative abundance of women.” The chairwoman spoke in a firm, brisk voice.

Angeni bit her lower lip, struggling to suppress a smile. This was a serious matter, but Warrick’s thwarted expression struck her as humorous. He flopped to his seat, angry.

She’d missed the last meeting, participating in an Alliance research conference on the topic of stopping illegal genetic experiments. At the most recent meeting she’d attended, this Cultural Exchange plan had been only in its formative stages.

Warrick so strenuously objected to this plan, because it would end his lobby to reinstate the old practice of polygamy, his solution to the imbalance of males to females on Olandia. She’d noticed he had an eye on her as a second wife, a choice influenced, no doubt, by her father’s position as Chancellor of Olandia Colony.

“The Alliance of Colonies is surprised by the resistance mounted by some of our fellow citizens. There is news of protests at the healing arts schools and research facilities. Violent conflict must be avoided,” Reva said. “We propose that at least one council member participate in The Exchange. We must show leadership. We have only four members eligible. Councilwomen, Cane, Michaels, Stolle, and Collins.” Reva raised her gaze from her notes to her audience.

“Five. We have five unbonded members. I will volunteer,” Angeni said.

She noticed the shocked silence and was somewhat surprised herself as well. Was she so desperate to escape the amorous plans of Healer Warrick?

Chairwoman Notah stared at her. She saw approval blossom on the other woman’s face. “Of course, a perfect solution—”

“No. Out of the question,” Froton Warrick interrupted, coming to his feet. “Chancellor Saxton Traek’s daughter and a physician of the Prime Order cannot participate in this pointless exercise. A waste. If we must succumb, use half-schooled students.” He punctuated his statement by pounding his bony fist against the large table. His face was

turning a furious crimson.

“Healer Warrick, you know we do not refer to ourselves as physician any longer.”

“Of course not, it would offend the sensibilities of the savages we must serve,” he replied sarcastically. “No one is fooled. There is nothing mystical about our work, but plain, hard science.”

Reva sighed. “We have heard you before on this, Healer.” She emphasized the word. “Who would be better than the Chancellor’s daughter to garner support for The Commission’s plan?” Reva reasoned. “We owe the Alliance for our security.”

What could Warrick say to refute this? Angeni could see it on his face; he knew he needed to regroup.

She tried to remain calm in the storm of her inner anticipation. The entire council murmured among themselves in excitement. It was true. Volunteering was admirable, the way a Chancellor’s daughter should act. An honorable sacrifice. Only she could see the truth in her own soul. Know the secrets that propelled her actions.

*** * * ***

“See me, Healer Angeni? I’m steering by myself,” said Ama.

No one knew her exact birth date, but Angeni guessed she neared five. The precious girl, with dark skin and stark white hair, rode with confidence. She steered her black and tan mount, of six-legged bovine species, to the inside of the circle and around a slower rider. The little animal’s six legs paced in perfect harmony of gate.

“Wonderful, Ama!” Angeni said. “You’ve made so much improvement.” The child smiled and puffed out her chest proudly. She loved seeing the joy on their small faces as freedom of movement returned—or, in some cases, was enjoyed for the first time.

Three weeks had passed since the Council meeting, Angeni stood in the center of a small arena with soft sandy footing. Over two hundred years ago, the domed hall over her head served to shelter a passenger concourse and gate area in a network of underground tunnels that provided shelter from Olandia’s hot sun and desert environment. Now the historic site hosted her riding therapy classes.

Music echoed cheerfully in the background in a one-two tempo. It relaxed the children

and rated the pace of the animals they rode.

Angeni smiled. Eight riders today. All the product of illegal experiments, the children's small bodies carried more than one set of genetic codes, like naturally occurring chimera twins.

The riderbeasties varied, three green large dragolizards with large blue, rotating eyes, three large birds, staying close together, the largest flying low, looping up and down and two small bovine, who plodded along slow and easy. They looked like a living carousel.

“They improve,” Sidra said as she stepped in to the circle.

Sidra and Isak left Dandrovica when she had. They helped her with the classes. Isak's skills with machinery were in great demand on Olandia. He'd quickly earned a nest egg. His financial generosity to her therapy program amazed her.

He'd come to her as she packed to leave the Sanctuary saying Sidra was going to be disengaged and abandoned to save freight costs.

He'd suggested the little bot would be useful to her. Sidra had simply said, “May I help with your little patients?” She'd seemed worried, much more aware of her fate than one expected of a mechanical. Angeni had often remembered Garek's warning to her about Sidra and realized he'd known Sidra was human. In the year since, Angeni had found no reason not to trust her completely. She was a bit of a loner, but warm and kind.

Some of the beasties had been used in mining industries and were painfully grateful for this new, lighter work. They needed to be special little animals to work with the children—quiet natured and kind. The ones with flying skills had to exercise special manners and control. Only the most skilled riders flew, giving an incentive for the children to progress along the stages steadily.

She knew her assistants would do a wonderful job with the children after she left. Her decision to leave was final. She intended to send for the orphaned children when she settled somewhere. The few with family would happily remain on Olandia.

Manzia, a girl of about six years, recently joined the program and had not been fitted with a prosthetic to replace her missing leg yet, a leg that had been denied her by a failed attempt to control bone length and growth speed. She wasn't sure what the

lawless, greedy fiends had planned her to be, but in the end they'd discarded the child.

“Scary, but fun,” the tiny little girl announced. She rode the second bovine, *Dono*, miniature in size with long, white wool, which provided handy handholds. The coarse curls squeezed through the child's small fingers.

“Evan, ride by *Manzia*, please,” Angeni said. The more advanced student on the flying bird nodded and rode alongside her in case emergency help was needed. The dark-haired boy looked to Angeni for approval of his skills as he guarded the other child. She smiled her appreciation for him.

“How am I doing, Healer Angeni? Can I fly soon?” asked Aslen, another older student astride a two-meter-tall blue-and-green bird with magnificent trailing tail feathers.

“Soon, Aslen, soon. Just a little more work on keeping your legs under your upper body for best balance. Can't have you topple of backwards.”

The child doubled his effort. The concentration on his sweet face so amusing. “I'll get it.”

Yes, this little one is close to flying with me, came to Angeni telepathically from the wise, old bird, *Zakee*. The bird was more articulate with telepathy than she was. No one but the animals—and her lost guardsman—knew she could speak telepathically with them. A secret she kept from her people.

Engrossed in watching the class, Angeni did not notice the approach of Councilman *Froton Warrick* through the cylindrical corridor connecting to the airlifts.

“Prime Healer, I have looked for you everywhere. I left a message on your holovid asking you to call me.”

“Oh, did you?” She was not above feigning ignorance to avoid him. “What did you want, Healer Warrick?”

He looked toward the children. “You need to spend more time at the hospital, instead of down here in the gloomy underground with these smelly animals and the mutant children.” He dusted at his immaculate pants' legs as though he were too superior to bear a little of the fine sand.

“We do not call the children mutants. They prefer transgenic or Muscovan transgen.”

“I’ve heard the political rhetoric.”

“It gives them a sense of belonging to each other.”

“Of no interest to me. I’m thinking of the cost of your time ... the missed income.”

“Income?”

“You are credited nothing for the therapy work you do with these ... er, ah, Muscovans, whereas, one or two extra healing procedures. I’m sure you see my meaning. More important clients bring more prestige.”

“I understand you well.”

Warrick missed the sarcasm in her voice.

“Good. I want you to attend the reception this evening with my wife and me.”

Suddenly, the child, Manzia, squealed in alarm. Angeni’s gaze followed the sound. She had slid to one side. Hanging on, barely. Dono, her furry little bovine mount, came to an immediate halt. Sidra rushed to help the child adjust safely.

Good boy.

***Treat?* he asked eagerly.**

Angeni smiled. He looked toward her, his flat nose wrinkled and wiggled in anticipation. *You’ll have your treat. You deserve it.*

“Are you listening to me?” Warrick demanded.

Patience. “Yes, of course, Healer.”

He cleared his throat in his annoying, superior way. “I said I want you to attend the reception with Milla and me.”

Warrick knew he was running out of time. And was trying to establish them as a couple. Or triangle, whatever he, she and his long-suffering wife would be.

“I’m committed to The Cultural Exchange. I must decline. ”

“Foolish woman! You will leave these muta ... ah ... Muscovan children behind?”

“The program is well-established,” she said, calmly. “It will function without me. Sidra and Isak—”

“You assume funding will continue,” he interrupted.

“If you will excuse me, Healer Warrick, I must speak with my team.”

“What of this evening?” He looked down his nose at her.

What a thick skin he had. “No. I will be hosting with my father and DeAndra.”

“We will speak later,” Warrick hissed as he turned and marched away.

Chapter Five

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Garek winced as pain from is bad knee nagged at him. “Why not put shuttle ports at entrance level?” he asked. “Too many steps here,” he grumbled.

“Don’t know, sir,” His military escort, a green, young Alliance Guardsman said. Garek had been summoned to the offices of his friend, Coyle Oside.

He should have listened to Angeni and had more work done on his knee. Hell, he missed the woman and longed to hold her again. He’d made his choice and he’d lived with it over the long year.

You must not leave. If she'd added the word, me. He could not have gone.

The old capitol before him was a rare Founders' structure, dating back four hundred years to the time the Olandian Science Colony first lost contact with Earth. The old capitol's age-weathered plasticrete walls were sheltered by a modern office tower telescoping a thousand meters into the clouds above.

“Don't suppose you'll tell me what this summons is about?”

“No sir, Captain.”

“That's what I thought.”

They reached the building's massive entry doors. Each Alliance district was represented by an animal likeness, woven into the door's steel filigree.

The younger man stepped back and motioned for him to proceed.

Garek stepped up to the double doors, and touched a carefully concealed sensor screen. The sharp-eyed kid tested him. Not everyone knew how to find it. A series of mechanical beeps followed. His facial features appeared on the imbedded holoscreen.

He matched his palm over the image of his previously recorded subcutaneous vein pattern. Flashing lights verified the match.

A cheerful mechanical voice said, “Your security code is recognized. Good morning, Captain Sahnjun.” The massive iron doors swung inward.

“Have a good day, sir.” The kid turned and marched away.

As Garek strode through the hallway, he glanced up at the high ceilings above him, and the statues of the founding fathers and mothers standing in architectural alcoves.

He became aware of curious stares. The leather leggings worn flying a one-man floater, were not normal in the capitol offices.

Hane, Coyle's Muscovan bodyguard manned the Chancellor's outer door with watchful stillness. The thin man stood three inches taller than Garek. He looked normal enough—Earthan human—except the unusual gray skin overlapping in

denticulate layers. And otherworldly silver eyes. Coyle had saved him from a forced death match fight on Aldor. Hane had been locked in battle with two aggressive Aldorian males, holding his own. But doomed to die without help.

Garek nodded a greeting. The Muscovan nodded back.

Behind his desk, Coyle stood at his approach.

“What’s going on? Why am I here?”

“Good to see you, Garek.” Coyle indicated a floating chair.

“I’ll stand. What’s so urgent you sent security orders to pull me out of retirement?” Garek noticed his friend’s blonde hair had grown past its usual length.

“I know how you’ve felt about your privacy this past year. I wouldn’t risk my hide bringing you here if it were not highest Alliance priority,” Coyle smiled now but it didn’t reach his serious brown eyes.

“High priority?” Garek’s blood chilled and his annoyance faded. Not many missions met that ranking. He sank into the new-high tech chair. “Let’s have it then.”

Coyle twirled his own chair around to look out the window and then swung it back. “What do you know of the science colony on the terraformed planet Olandia?”

“Some. A former volcanic world with good air. Settled by a lost science colony from the blue planet Earth. They built this structure before moving on to Olandia. That’s about it. I’m thinking you’re about to tell me a lot more.”

“Right. The science colony is dedicated to accelerated genetic research. Population isolation, a genetic bottleneck, led them to become fixated on establishing a homogeneous gene pool. Near twins, all of them. Your mission concerns their lack of genetic diversity. It’s great for organ transplants, but too similar for a good birthrate numbers. With their shortage of males, it grows worse.”

Garek gave a curt nod. “I heard rumors the Alliance plans to intervene in some way. Ironical that we’ve learned enough science from Olandia in a few generations of contact to meddle in their business now.”

“True, a certain irony in that.” Coyle steeped his hands.

“They also pass on their ancestors’ scientific gifts on to the offspring. They’re almost all medical professionals and research scientists. A few are Healers of the Prime Order.” The memory of his Olandian healer, in the darkness of night, curling golden hair falling about her face, striking amber eyes daring him to die, challenging him to fight for his own life, filled in his mind.

Coyle nodded. “Rare to find a misfit Olandian who pursues another field.”

Coyle steeped his hands. “The Alliance Science Commission studied this matter at length. They believe Olandia is headed for long-range problems due to a new virus which mutates fast and in ingenious ways. It’s similar to Morland’s Virus, the Earth strain traced to the original colony, to a crewman named Morland.”

“They’ll think of something to handle the disease resistance.”

“Science Commission believes we owe it to them to help.”

“Alright. Why not loan them eggs from our family labs?”

“We suggested it. Promptly vetoed.”

“Sure it was. Too fast and easy,” Garek said with sarcasm.

“The plan is to add fresh genes in the more natural way.” His cheeks flushed. “That’s where you come in with your ... er ... knowledge of animal genetic matching.”

Garek jumped up from the chair, the force sent the thing flying into the nearest wall. “You can’t be serious! You would turn my livestock station into a human breeding farm?”

Coyle closed his eyes. “A small trial at first.”

“Let me guess. Olandia wants to evaluate the offspring of their purebreds and our common, primitive humans before committing to more.”

Hane stepped into the office, a warning expression on his face, no doubt having heard the chair hit the wall. Garek saw Coyle send his guard a shake of his head.

He was not altogether relieved when the big man stepped back out. A brawl with the two of them might feel good right now. “I’m leaving now.”

Coyle held up his hand. “Stop.”

His friend had just stepped into his former role of Alliance Guard commander.

“I want no part of this, Commander.” With the title, Garek signaled his awareness of the change in their footing.

“What of the possibility of interplanetary war? Any interruption in resources for their labs could be disastrous to Olandia. They could become extinct in a generation.”

“We’ve had occasional fights break out, but nothing interplanetary in many years.”

“You’d know about those occasional skirmishes, considering Gandos swamp. You did well there.”

He inclined his head. “I had some help.” After a pause, Garek continued, “You never told me the real reason our team went to Gandos.”

Coyle leaned back in his chair and sighed heavily, looking guilty as hell. “What makes you think another reason existed?”

“Something I heard in the hospital contradicted the official Alliance explanation. Thought you’d tell me the truth sooner or later. It’s later.”

“What did you hear?”

“That Aldorian triads gathered in the area.”

Coyle’s eyes narrowed. “Yes, they did. Who told you?”

“Do you need to know?”

“Funny. Yes. It’s important.”

“An Aldorian girl hiding in plain sight as a robot. Sidra. Said they hunted wives.”

Coyle's eyes darkened as if the name meant something to him. "What does she look like?"

"Black hair, pretty in an exotic way, average height. Don't remember her eye color." Garek waited. "You have no more to say?"

"Your source was accurate. No Aldorian woman in the area was safe at the time. They were watched and followed. I planned to tell you everything as soon as I'm free to do so."

"It's ongoing then?"

"Back to Olandia's genetic problems," Coyle said without answering.

Garek threw up his hands. "Fine."

"The Alliance believes the science colony's supply lines are vulnerable."

"Do you have reason to expect trade route sabotage?"

"Nothing specific." Coyle's eyes did not quite meet his. "Look Garek, maybe The Cultural Exchange is wrong. Maybe it can't be done. By the Founders' Spirits, I don't know. But the necessary genetic data has been kept for hundreds of years."

Garek searched the ceiling for answers. Who was he kidding? He'd do whatever the Alliance asked of him. But he didn't have to like it. "Humans are very different from animals, Commander."

Coyle ignored his statement of the obvious. "Your computers will adapt to human genetics easily and facilitate finding the ideal counterparts—"

"Counterparts? Hah! Breeding pairs you mean."

"—to maximize dilution of each Olandian woman's genetic makeup," Coyle said with stubborn determination, his jaw set now, his eyes blazing anger.

An idea occurred to him. "Maybe you and I should volunteer. You know the ASC has mandated a five-year moratorium on the use of uterine replicators in all the districts due to over-population worries."

“Right. The decision is unfair to Clothoes. We have no excess population. Too many early wars, too few births.”

“We might never find a woman willing to take on childbirth without the incubation provided by the artificial womb. Especially not an independent Clothoes woman. If we wait until the greater population gets back to an acceptable quota, you and I might be too old to raise kids. ”

“As an Aldorian male, I would not be encouraged to take a wife from my adopted world anyway.”

“An Aldorian wife would not happen either,” Garek said

“I realize that,” Coyle snapped back. “No Aldorian woman would accept me because I was raised in another culture. Too few of them anyway.”

Deep sadness washed over his friend’s face. Hell. He’d pushed the other man too far this time. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. Maybe an Olandian woman brave, or crazy enough to sign up for this misguided plan would take you on?”

“Real funny,” Coyle answered. “But there is some common sense behind your comments.”

“Clothoes has enough of its own restrictions on matebonding.”

“At any rate, I have more pressing worries right now. You’re the ideal person to coordinate the first phase of The Cultural Exchange. You have the skills—and Alliance special forces training—and the top level security clearances.”

“Why do you need someone with Alliance Security clearance? Expecting violent resistance to this plan?”

“We have word of protests among Olandian students. They resent it and say they’ll lose their advantage in the medical sciences.”

“They’re right.”

Taking a long, deep breath, Coyle said, “Your participation has been requested by Olandia.” His friend waited for his reaction.

The Chancellor just played his best card. Garek wondered if he'd given away any hint of his interest in the Olandian Healer who'd saved his life last year.

“We both know I owe Olandia.” He decided to push back some and see how far it got him. He inspected his fingernails, drawing out the moment. “I’ll consider this project if the Alliance supplies a PRAX slingship.” He named the most cutting-edge hyperspeed flying machine available. The PRAX flew the moving pathways in space better than any other machine, safer in the chaotic loops.

Coyle jumped to his feet, sending his chair flying backward. “Do you have any idea what that would cost?” Coyle’s chair folded to a neat package and slid under his desk.

This would send them after some other fool. He folded his arms at his chest.

“We don’t expect that much resistance,” Coyle continued.

“Your choice. Take it or leave it.” Garek stood and started walking to the door.

“We could force your compliance.”

He turned and searched his friend’s expression. “You’re bluffing. That goes against everything the Alliance stands for. Freedom of choice and equality—He waved a searching hand. “—all the good stuff.”

“I do not bluff!”

Garek’s mood improved by the light second. He laughed.

Coyle tossed his pen across the desk in front of him. “Will you agree to help Olandia?”

“I agree to try.”

Coyle always tightly controlled his temper, no small feat, considering his aggressive Aldorian blood.

“Good. Angeni Traek personally requested your involvement.”

Garek felt the smile wash from his face.

Chapter Six

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“Angeni, my sweet child, reconsider this madness.” Her father, Saxton Traek, spoke in a hushed and insistent tone. They stood alone in his home’s ballroom awaiting the arrival of their guests. On a stage at the other end of the long room, musicians fussed with their instruments. Tonight they would celebrate the launch of The Cultural Exchange.

“I’ve made my decision.”

“I know you support the Alliance plan, but there is no need to become personally involved. DeAndra and I want you to change your mind.” Her father turned to her, taking her hands in his.

“Father, I love you and DeAndra and I do not relish causing you worry, but I must do this. Supporting your political position is not my only motive, Father.”

His graying blonde brows drew together in a puzzled frown. She squeezed his hand to reassure him. “I have no real future on Olandia. I never have, you know. We rarely speak of my mother. But, Father, you of all people know I cannot forget that she was Aldorian.”

“Oh, by the Saints, no,” The Chancellor breathed a rasping sigh. “Is that the reason for this?”

She gave a brief nod. “It is ... part of it, yes.”

“There is pain in your words.”

“Yes. It’s painful to speak of.”

“It makes it very real for both of us. “You look so like your mother tonight. Her true identity has been safe for almost thirty years. It will remain so.”

She shook her head. “I’m not tolerating a life without the sunlight as well as she did. The vitamin supplements are not enough.”

“I see.” He took a heavy breath. “Perhaps we can try—”

She touched her father’s arm. “We are not free to speak. Froton Warrick is coming.” She looked to a point beyond her father’s shoulder. Froton was indeed cutting through the crush of people gathering in the outer room.

“Chancellor Traek, you will intervene in this Alliance stupidity at once.” Warrick stepped forward with no preliminary courtesies.

Angeni knew her father was distracted by her disclosure, but trying to focus on Councilman Warrick’s angry words. Her parent was going through the pain of fully realizing the burden she carried. Her heart hurt for him. He was a good man. She knew in her soul, he would have spared her this if he could.

“Will the entanglement of your daughter in this Saints forsaken scheme make you do something?” Warrick pushed onward, stepping too close to her father. Her father held his ground. “This Cultural Exchange is a sham to cover the dilution of a proud and pure race of people.”

“Enough! Councilman Warrick, you over-step your bounds.”

Angeni spoke, “Some argue our Old Mother Earth culture with higher tech is overwhelming other bloodlines and cultures.”

“Nonsense. Someone must intercede,” Warrick spat. “The ASC will not stop with the trial group. You must prevent your foolish, foolish daughter from leading this travesty,” Warrick continued, his voice rising to a near-hysterical pitch, his face blotchy with his growing anger. “She legitimizes it.”

“That’s the idea.” She clenched her fists. He spoke as though she were not well within hearing range. The man was as devious as a Vandorian parasite. Just like the little transgenic parasites, Warrick was very hard to control, to guide toward beneficial

affects.

“Warrick, the changing adaptive physiology of Morland’s virus threatens—” The Chancellor spoke with a firm voice, his saddened eyes watching his daughter.

Warrick gave a rude snort. “The threat of Morland’s virus is years in the future. In terms of significant statistical losses to our population, I assure you of this.”

“What of lives?” Angeni demanded.

He ignored her. “We must consider the more immediate threat to our economic stability.”

“Economic stability?” Her father asked.

“You see The Cultural Exchange in terms of the shared medical skills, as it impacts our natural competitive edge in the field?” she asked.

“Of course.” Warrick waved impatiently. “The offworlders will gain the capability to train their youth in the ways of the healing sciences. They will know our secrets, have their own physicians. We must not allow that to happen.”

“Warrick, we do not cultivate a total monopoly on the healing sciences,” her father said. “The Aldorians have strong natural healers among their peo—”

“Nonsense!”

The Chancellor pressed on. “I’m familiar with your disdain for the primitive healing arts. As for my daughter’s involvement, she is twenty-eight years old and very much used to making her own choices.” He nodded in respect toward his daughter. “I’m proud of her willingness to lead her people on this unusual journey into the future.”

“She will be leading her people to certain disaster,” Warrick said, the sharpness and volume of his voice startling those around them.

Her father smiled at the crowd, which trickled forward now.

“Think, Healer Warrick,” Angeni said. “Think of the potential for medical advancements with the aid of the children of this experiment. It may save the lives of

your pure and undiluted descendants.”

“Ridiculous. It will never come to that,” Warrick hissed.

“We cannot be so sure,” she said.

“What then of the Clothoesian primitive who comes to take the women, including your daughter, away?” Warrick continued. “What do you know of the man?”

“I know that my daughter recommends him most highly.” The Chancellor glanced toward Angeni.

“Clothoes is a society with Aldorian warring roots in their past. Much too aggressive. Far too primitive for our women. Not much better than transgenic mutants.”

Angeni gasped. “Warrick, you go too far!”

“My daughter is correct,” the Chancellor said.

“The security escort for tomorrow is Alliance Captain Garek Sahnjun, an unbonded Clothoesian,” Warrick persisted. “What if he abducts all five women for his own uses? His people are only a couple of hundred years out of the cliff dwellings of the Clothoes red mountains.” Warrick stated this with obvious disgust in his voice.

“Councilman Warrick, I think you judge Garek Sahnjun by your own standards and moral codes,” Angeni spoke with swift anger. This was too much. It was Warrick who wanted multiple wives.

“So, Chancellor, your mind will not be changed, I take it?”

“No, Warrick it will not,” her father answered.

Warrick’s only response was to turn and leave the ballroom.

“What of his words about the escort? You recommended the man. You trust him?”

“Yes,” she said without hesitation. “No matter his primitive upbringing, Garek is an honorable man. I came to know him well in just a few weeks.”

“I trust your instincts.”

Two hours later, the sound of running feet approached from behind the closed ballroom doors. The low rumble of happy voices stopped as members of the Olandian Security Service rushed in.

“Chancellor Traek, there has been an explosion. The ship that was to carry the women to Clothoes. ... Two of our best men lost in the blast.”

*** * * ***

As steaming water ran over his soapy shoulders, Garek shook his head to get his hair out of his eyes.

He was back home now on Clothoes now. He lived alone in a new house set against a wooded cliffside. He’d built it just after his arranged fiancée had opted out and bonded with his brother, a few months ago.

***Don’t leave me.* Garek sucked in a deep breath and closed his eyes. Who was he kidding? Those haunting mind-words were the main reason he’d agreed to Coyle’s request.**

His pulse sped like a distance runner as he remembered the her soft body close to his the last day. Her lips soft and pliant under his. Desire shot through him now. The soft sounds as she’d kissed him, remembered well.

With rough swipes, he rinsed the soap off. Attraction aside, his debt to Angeni carried as much weight as his loyalty to his friend Coyle. He owed the woman his life, and his ability to walk. Even though the movement wasn’t pain free, it was walking nonetheless. If he’d allowed her the adjustments she wanted to make before he left Dandrovica, he would no doubt be even better condition.

Before the advent of slingship streaming, he would not have lived long enough to make it to the trauma center. In the early days, men spent lifetimes in transit and burned through enough fuel to light stars. He was a lucky man.

His gut told him something else was going on. More at stake for Coyle than he admitted. He was sure of it. Just a matter of learning what.

He would see her while he was there. He would find some excuse. Couldn’t pass up the

chance to explore the heat he felt from the woman. He'd known he built this house for her. Maybe a complaint about the knee joint she'd replaced for him would provide the excuse he needed. The bad knee could use an updated lubrication system.

Maybe she'd found another man by now. His stomach lurched at the thought.

Stepping out of the shower, he'd moved into the drying chamber when he heard the bell on the holovid. The shrill sound emitted from the small white box was the urgent frequency, reserved for emergencies only. He hastily wrapped a heavy towel around his waist and strode out into his sleeping area.

"A cross-colony message coming from Olandia. Urgent," the computer voice stated.

"Yes, go ahead." The image of Angeni Traek materialized from his thoughts and dreams to the holovid. He sat down on the large bed. She was more lovely than in his dreams.

"Captain Sahnjun. Do you remember me? I helped you on Dandrovia moon, repaired your knee." Her soft, feminine voice spoke from the machine.

"I remember you." At least a thousand times a day, Garek thought. His body was immediately on alert. Her voice sounded unsteady, worried.

"Are you hurt?" he asked. "Tell me." He saw her take a deep breath and compose herself.

"I understand the Alliance Science Commission has asked you to escort us to your home."

Before he could answer, she continued, "There has been sabotage aboard the public transport slingship that was being prepared for our travel. Garek jerked in response to this information. Us. She'd said, 'us.'

"Are you sure it wasn't an accident?"

"An investigative team has been over the wreckage. They found evidence of an explosive device and the remains of two men suspected of setting it off."

"Any ideas about who would do this? Any witnesses before the blast?"

“There was enough evidence for the team to glean volumes of information on the mercenary men who carried it out, but nothing of who hired them. If they had not miscalculated in their timing, we ... my traveling companions and I ... would have been on that ship.”

“What do you mean your traveling companions? Why are you coming along?” He asked the question with careful precision.

She paused. “I volunteered. I’m representing the Olandian Council and the Chancellor, my father.” She waved a hand. His eyes followed the motion. “To support ... to diffuse resistance among our young people to The Cultural Exchange,” she said in answer. “It’s a sound plan.” She lifted her chin.

“Wouldn’t a political liaison function best at home, Healer?”

As Angeni watched, Garek’s expression darkened, his shocked look was changing to a hard anger. Anger directed at her. Her indignation flared. Heavens above, he looked good. His shoulders were bare and his upper chest. As much as she could see of it. Perhaps he had just showered. The display on the vid said it was evening, bedtime there.

She forced herself to speak again, “I’m not acting as a public relations liaison. I’m to be a participant.”

After a moment, he demanded, “Whose idea was that? Some idiot at the ASC?”

Angeni folded her hands in her lap and clenched her jaw. How dare he question her this way? She’d thought him so polite and well-mannered. “I’m afraid I’m the idiot you speak of.” Hurt and anger at his misjudgment of the situation, she pressed on into the silence anyway. “Captain Sahnjun, we need you here as soon as possible. We need to leave Olandia before other acts of sabotage can occur. I need your help to protect my people.”

“Hell in space!” he said, raking a hand through his hair. She noticed it was wet. Shower. Definitely, he’d been in the shower. Her imagination supplied distracting images.

“Hell.” His voice softened, perhaps in response to the barely veiled fear in her own voice. “Call it off.”

She lifted a hand to her aching temple. “I believe in what we are trying to do. To make my people healthier,” she replied firmly, but felt a betraying quiver of her lips. Holovid screens were too large, too personal.

He adjusted the slipping towel at his waist. She followed the movement, fascinated, amazed the attraction she’d had for him survived. How could she go to another man, even when he did not want her?

“I’ll leave as soon as possible. Be there by sunrise.”

“Thank you.”

Garek disconnected the call. He’d be there or die trying, he thought. He sought calm. The echo of fear in her voice ripped through him as he hurriedly grabbed clothes and pressed the key code that summoned his shuttle from the garage.

*** * * ***

Just over an hour later, flying fast with cool efficiency, Garek tried to ignore the unaccustomed panic dogging him. His mind centered on what might be happening on Olandia right now. Before he could get there. He’d been notified his new ship had slipped into a port slot. He’s nosed his shuttle into port parking and headed for the PRAX.

His thoughts told him the next logical phase of the sabotage plan might be to take the Chancellor’s daughter hostage. Or attempt to assassinate her. He clenched his jar to keep from crying out in rage.

He tried the new, portable communication device hidden behind in his right ear, designed to connect him with the com onboard the ship. The Alliance had sent it by currier today.

“PRAX A.C.-9280. Oside here.”

He stopped walking. “Coyle, what are you doing there? Thought you’d be in your office at the capitol,” he said. “Little unusual for a man of your importance to pilot these days.”

“I was notified of the explosion on Olandia. I’m officially on vacation. Unofficially, I

thought you might need a second to fly her.

Suspicion needled him. Coyle had gotten to the ship fast, even for someone with his resources.

“What is your status on the count? How long until launch?”

“Supplies and crew are aboard. We leave in one-half hour with or without you—“

“I’m nearby,” Garek replied as he pushed the button to terminate the conversation.

He ignored the curious stares of the other travelers along the walkway and increased his stride.

After taking the airlift tube down, Garek walked out at the underground level and hailed a subsurface taxi. He handed the pilot a several folded bills and told him to take the police lane.

“You with traffic police?” The man took off his cap and scratched his head, then settled the cap back in place.

“No. The Guard.”

“Yes, sir.” The man nodded and sped up.

Adrenaline surged as the shuttle bolted forward through the artificial brightness.

He could not fathom Angeni’s participation in this saving her people fiasco. How had she become involved in the ASC’s Cultural Exchange? His thoughts roiled. What kind of an animal tried to kill women?

He was not surprised she’d refused to back off at the introduction of danger into the mix. Incredible. What was she thinking? He’d long ago given up trying to understand females. A thought rocked through his brain. Could he protect her, and then stand by while another man claimed her?

Chapter Seven

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When the taxi landed, Garek left it at a run. He saw the PRAX. The sleek, blade-shaped slingship was already lowered onto the runway tracks. Engines screamed. Hell of a sound.

He touched his fingertip to the security screen on the entry. His image and palm pattern flashed back at him. The doors slid open.

Coyle sat in the pilot's seat. Hane stood sentinel a few feet to Coyle's right, manning the space state monitor. The auto pilot drone was inactive—still and silent.

In the months since their meeting at the capitol, the man he'd grown up with had made a good start on growing his hair long, in the custom of an Aldorian warrior. The flaxen hair fell about his shoulders. Troubled eyes searched the lights on the console as if looking for answers and finding few.

“What's wrong?” Garek demanded.

“The PRAX may be too bloody heavy. Prep engineers miscalculated.”

“Don't assume it was an error. We're responding to an act of sabotage.”

Coyle flashed him a quick glance, then gave a sharp nod. “Right.”

“Anything heavy we don't need?” Garek asked, joining Coyle at the com.

“Gun. The aft Zoni gun.”

“Get rid of it. We'll hope we get shot at from the other sides. How are the propulsion strips? I don't want our microwaved remains to be scattered around the universe if this thing goes unstable in hyperspeed.” Garek said, talking of the fusion heads strung in a complex helix along the bottom of the ship. The propulsion strips weren't needed

after they were in the stream but they were crucial to obtaining hyperflight.

“Brand new,” Coyle answered. “New tachyon linking system, too. Flux approaches zero. Everything that could have wear or damage has been replaced as a precaution.” He left the pilot’s seat.

“Good.” Garek strapped himself in the Captain’s seat. More evidence of the Alliance’s commitment to this project. Fresh fusion propulsion strips did not come cheap. Hyperspeed travel took advantage of the fact that the universe was stuck together in many places like a deflated balloon, but the engineering was still tricky. And there were issues of unpredictable chaotic turbulence due to the water-like rush and flow of the channels that lead to other worlds. Pilots had to be skilled.

“When the Zoni is off-loaded, we launch,” he ordered.

Minutes later Coyle spoke, “The aft gun has been detached and off-loaded and all essential personnel are in their life support cubes. Traffic says we’re cleared for the top security stream to Olandia.”

Garek pushed the countdown button on the console of the craft’s computer. The voice of began the count. At zero, the craft surged forward into the first of several revolutions on the runway track. Seconds later, the slingship broke free of Clothoes.

*** * * ***

In three hours time, the ship had attained orbit around Olandia colony. They hovered in the atmosphere awaiting an underground port slot to open. Back thrusters rumbled to holding speed.

“Have I read somewhere that all District Chancellors have guest houses on Olandia? A courtesy.”

“Yes, in case of illness or injury to a Chancellor or his family,” Coyle answered. “Mine is a Founders era mausoleum called, Blackford Hall. Never use it. I’m only thirty-five, too young for my own convalescent center.”

“Yeah, sure.” Garek grinned, but was distracted by his thoughts that he’d be too late to help Angeni.

“The place is staffed with a full-time healer and all the necessary support personnel.

The healer's name is Froton Warrick, I believe. He's a distinguished member of the Olandian council. Or so he likes to tell me. Other than holovid, I've only met him once or twice."

Garek nodded.

Coyle's dark eyes narrowed. "Why do you ask?"

"When we reach jump range, I could use an antigrav suit and get down to your place there. Borrow your shuttle, sneak in and get the women with minimal attention drawn to us."

"Good idea. Keep the PRAX up here, ready to leave fast. Get your suit on. I'll call the Space Traffic Central, get you cleared. And Garek, be careful of the shuttle. The machine is old. Neuro-link tech."

"No clearance, Coyle." A part of Garek's concentration registered the comment about the shuttle. "I hate neuro-link."

"What do you mean, no clearance? Are you losing it, man? If their Security doesn't blast you out of the air, you'll be overrun by an out going ship. This mission isn't worth your life."

"I disagree." He stood. Take the helm back."

"You're the one who came into this thing kicking and screaming, remember?" Coyle said as he slipped back to the Captain's seat.

"Right, Chancellor, but the stakes have changed. And you know it. Angeni Traek could be dead in a few hours. Not to mention, the authority of the Alliance could be shot to hell. I've got you and your loyal sidekick over there to watch my back."

In record time, Garek returned in a metallic gray antigravity suit with two small, shielded rotary prop rocket engines mounted on the back.

"You have to have clearance, man." Coyle struck up a conversation with Olandian Space Traffic Central. "They do not have to know it's you they're watching out for. If I can create enough confusion, they'll miss one small human-sized blip on their screens."

The genuine concern in his friend's expression made him feel guilty for his earlier

suspicion. “Like the trick you used to get us on Gandos last year?”

“The same. Other than your unfortunate crash, it was a perfect mission.”

Garek grinned and adjusted his safety straps. “Sorry to ruin your spotless record.”

“I can’t help much with the outgoing traffic. You’ll have to dodge it. But I can keep them from shooting you out of the sky.”

In an awful approximation of an elderly female voice, Coyle said, “Space Traffic Central, this is shuttle ... S-1-T ... ah, let me see, yes, 38954.”

“If the female leaders of Clothoes witnessed this performance, they would shun you for the stereotype.”

Coyle glared at him for quiet, before proceeding, “Could you be so kind as to assist us? My husband is taking me to my optical appointment and I’m afraid he is not himself today. He’s had much too much in the way of Trillia beverage and just, er ... well, I mean ... fell asleep at the console, poor dear. I just can’t remember exactly how to pilot one of these things, it’s been ever so long since my mandatory shuttle lessons. These things do change so much, you know, every few years. Oh, me, we seem to be dropping out of our skyway.”

Coyle’s loyal guard was shaking his head and smiling, well, almost smiling. Without more wasted time Garek stepped through the exit into the clouds.

Minutes afterward, safely down, Garek came to ground in the irrigated gardens of Blackford Hall. The planet that supported Olandia colony was too hot and dry to support more than cacti and succulent plantlife. He removed the antigravity suit and stashed it.

He soon found shuttlecraft docking port, its cylindrical shape outlined against the evening sky. Using a key card Coyle gave him, he slipped inside.

After Coyle’s warning, Garek expected the worst in terms of transportation. At home, he had one of the first neuro-links ever built, a true classic. It’d been his father’s. Nice to look at, but he seldom flew it. The neuro-link crafts were just too temperamental to be safe, especially in the full-sky traffic of a modern city.

The vehicle he found inside, as best as he could see, having stifled the automatic lighting, was a recent model shuttle. At closer inspection, he found it had a couple of well-hidden Zoni laser guns. Not standard equipment for a personal flyer.

He had no keycard for the new shuttle, but a little creativity got him inside and airborne.

*** * * ***

Saxton Traek paced his library, in front of his trusted adviser and his daughter. “We will stop The Cultural Exchange now. I won’t have my daughter endangered.” They were dressed formally for a dinner with an Alliance ambassador.

“Father—”

“Tabra, get the ASC on the holo vid for me. Hurry!”

“Yes, Chancellor.” The man rushed to do his bidding.

“You must realize we can’t back out of this now,” Angeni said with quiet determination.

“Of course we can,” he insisted. “Of course we can.”

She smiled sadly. “No. It’s too late. When those mercenaries put the explosives on that ship it became even more critical I go than before. If we change our plans now, the credibility and authority of the Alliance will be in jeopardy. The Alliance is more important than I am. Without them, safe passenger travel food supply routes to outlying colonies would be lost.”

“Other people’s safety means little to me in comparison to my daughter,” his voice vibrated with sincerity.

She shook her head. “You do not mean that. Think of the genetically damaged children. The people behind those experiments steal genetic material from wherever the opportunity arises. Without the Alliance, they would flourish openly.”

Her father stilled. “I’ve seen you with the injured children. What they do, how they treat the human results of their failed experiments, angers me as well. I’m outraged that they abandon their victims on the streets. Still...your safety...”

“Father, we must do everything we can to protect the Alliance,” she pressed. “Have you forgotten the stories of the days before the Alliance? Our people nearly starved. The Guard stands between us and social chaos”

He father drew himself up. “I haven’t forgotten. I’m an Alliance Chancellor. You do not have to convince me of the great need of the Alliance of Colonies. Tabra, have you reached the ASC?”

“Yes, sir, the head of the ASC is on holovid screen.” The Chancellor’s assistant replied, gesturing toward the screen three.

Angeni reached for her father’s arm, detaining his move toward the screen. “You must realize, by the time any formal announcement of my withdrawal is made, I could be dead anyway.”

“What are you saying?”

“I heard a couple of security officers talking minutes ago. They said if whoever is behind this really wants to stop The Cultural Exchange, the next step would be an attempt to abduct me or kill me.”

“No!”

“We must trust Garek Sahnjun and the Guard to handle the situation.”

“Do you think he can, Angeni?” The Chancellor asked this with a soft voice, his eyes sad. “The potential cost is so high.”

“If anyone can, Captain Sahnjun can. He’s the most determined, stubborn-headed male you can imagine.” She smiled. “The injuries the Sanctuary team treated on Dandrovica should have killed him. And when he survived surgical repair,” she made a sweeping gesture with her hand, “I was sure the post-op pain would kill him. It wasn’t just non-Olandian vigor that kept him going, but sheer strength of will.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence, Prime Healer,” Garek Sahnjun said as he stepped through the open doors.

Angeni’s heart jumped to her throat.

“How did you get in here?” asked Chancellor Traek.

Garek turned his eyes on the other man. “Chancellor, we’ll sit down with your security team and talk about how I got in here when we make it safely through this mess. At that time you can tell me why you let this little scrap of a woman talk you into allowing her to become mixed up in the ASC’s Cultural Exchange garbage in the first place.”

“Charming, Captain Sahnjun,” Angeni said. “I assure you my father allows me my own decisions at my age.”

“You’ll find her gifted at irrefutable arguments, Captain.” Her father chuckled.

Garek stepped closer and looked down into Angeni’s shining gold eyes. She stepped away, her expression distant and formal. He sensed she was blocking any telepathic communication with him.

“We need to get the other women and leave—” He was interrupted by a buzz coming from his ear.

“Garek?” Coyle said. “Where are you?”

“I heard your calls,” he said, not taking his gaze from Angeni.

Coyle’s sigh of relief was audible. “Why didn’t you answer? I thought I was calling a dead man.”

“I’m ... we’re fine.”

“Could be trouble at the Traek estate. Scans show human-shaped masses of heat around the grounds.”

“Not Olandian Security?”

“No, all accounted for. I would advise you to put off going in until you know if they’re friendly or not.”

“I’m already in.” Turning his eyes away from Angeni, he asked, “Chancellor, do you have a special security team in the bushes?”

“Uh ... no, I’m afraid not. I’m unaware—”

Unease sitting in Garek’s stomach tightened to a steel fist. He was responsible for others in this, not just Angeni. Time was the enemy. Taking a deep breath he asked calmly, “Where are the rest of the passengers? The other women?”

“In a hotel near the subsurface launching port, awaiting the slingship’s arrival,” Angeni answered.

He relayed the message to Coyle.

“We’ll get to them. Go now. Take care of yourself and Healer Traek!”

“Right,” he answered.

“Chancellor, get me the construction plans for this place. We need a safer way out. A fast way.”

Angeni spoke, “We could use the exit tunnels under the building. I know them well.”

“Yes, of course,” her father agreed. “Hurry! Not much time.” After a quick hug for Angeni, the Chancellor left the room, eager to do his part in stalling the intruders.

“Show me the tunnels.” Garek said, motioning with his hand for her to lead on. “Are there basic supplies there?” he asked as they walked.

“Yes, food, medical supplies and artificial lights.”

This was not exactly the woman he remembered. She was far colder to him.

“You can’t travel efficiently in that fancy, blue dress thing and those shoes with shiny stones all over them,” Garek said as they continued out the door way and down the hall to an airlift elevator.

“There’s no time to change. I’ll be fine. I won’t slow you down.”

“Good.” Great, he couldn’t take his eyes off her in that sexy dress, so different from the concealing robes he’d seen her wear before.

Angeni stopped moving forward. “What about the safety of my father and stepmother?”

“My guess is the strike team outside is planning to waylay you when you leave the grounds, not storming the Chancellor’s doors and tangling with his guard force.”

She nodded, reassured.

When they reached the privacy of the security shelter below the Chancellor’s home, they collected a few items.

Garek threw a backpack over one arm, trying not to stare at the way Angeni’s dress hugged her curves.

“Lead on,” he said, his voice a bit low and hoarse. Her fragrance wafted over his senses, distracting him mercilessly. *Who would protect her from him?*

Angeni turned to see him, puzzled as she continued, slipping the dress from one shoulder. “What do you mean?”

***Nothing.* He gestured in the direction of the door, not wanting to explain himself. In her rush to get them out of here, the woman seemed unaware she read his mind as though conversing. It hadn’t taken long for it to start again. The feel of her voice in his mind heated his blood, so sexy.**

Perhaps his thoughts of sex were as potent as life and death struggled in triggering the phenomenon between them. He watched her, trying not to think.

***Have to be able to run.* Suddenly, she lifted the hem of her dress, tearing it into strips. Then she set to work tying its length in knots between her legs, tying the thing up out of her way some. Her bare legs were beautiful.**

Angel, you’re destroying my ability to think.

I am?* She looked down at the dress. *Oh, forgive me. I realize you come from a modest society, Captain. Ordinarily, I would respect that without question, but as you said, time is important ... the circumstances unusual. The sooner I can move freely and get out of here, the safer my family will be.

“Speak aloud,” he ordered.

What? “Oh, heavens! I see. I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize. Too intimate, of course. You’re right.”

“Hell, Angel.” Garek regretted snapping at her over the telepathy. “Do what you have to do. Let’s get moving.” He held his breath. He was aware of her, heavily aroused. He could’ve turned his back. A more honorable man would have.

She went back to work to finish tying the blue dress up. He longed to help her with the task. It would go faster if he did, but he must keep a safe distance or he’d grab the woman and tumble her down to the ground.

“Could you look for a medical supplies kit, please? Red and white box.”

“Kit’s right here. Seen them a few times before.”

With a soft smile, she turned toward him. “Being in the Alliance Guard, I suppose you have.”

Butterflies dive-bombed his stomach. Why in a blind walk through hell did this woman stir his blood as no other had? He was shaking, fine tremors all over. An unsettling thing. He could not allow himself to pull her into his arms as his body ached to do.

“Enough!” he yelled. She jumped, startled by his harsh command. Perhaps the Clothoes myths about the male of the species uncontrollable urges were not as far-fetched as he believed. He took two deep breaths. “Enough supplies,” he improvised.

“Yes, enough supplies. You’re right, we should go.” Angeni turned to face him. She wasn’t ready to explore the telepathic link they’d shared either. Or the sexy masculine glances he’d sent her as she dispensed with the tails of her cumbersome gown. She raised the barriers in her mind and slammed them tightly shut again. After steadying herself a moment, she tried to smile, to behave casually. “Do you have family, Captain Sahnjun?” She wanted to know about the fiancée he’d left her for.

“Why do you ask?”

“I won’t endanger a matebonded man.”

“I don’t have a wife. Or children.” He looked away.

The earcom sounded.

“What is it?”

“The five other lady passengers are all aboard your ship, but we were followed. Someone knows we’re here. Same crew of mercenaries from the Chancellor’s bushes is my guess.”

“Hellfire!” Garek exclaimed. Now, finally, at least his mind was jolted back to the work at hand.

“It gets worse. Scans show moving warm bodies swarming all over your ride.”

“I left that shuttle three blocks away from here.”

“Yes, well, they must be tracking us somehow. That’s the only explanation. They’ve been just a few steps behind us all the way. More bad news, sensors show another PRAX on the launching accelerator in the second revolution. Has at least partial military capabilities. Dammit, I hate this but I have to leave without you two for now.”

“Go. Can’t be helped. Get in touch with the Alliance. See what you can find out. If their budget allows PRAX slingships and Zoni weaponry, we’re dealing with more than a few angry students. I’ll guard Angeni. Go!”

“Agreed. See you in about twenty-four hours.”

“You don’t think the students are behind this?” Angeni asked, grasping his arm. He looked down. Her touch was accompanied by warmth, a most pleasant sensation, radiating up his arm. She was beautiful with her amber eyes looking so worried.

Sexual awareness crossed her face. Maybe she wasn’t as unaffected by his proximity as she portrayed. Removing her hand from his arm, he took it into his. A wavy, little shake in her small fingers came bolting through his, resonating through his entire body like a shock wave, threatening his all too tenuous hold on arousal recovery. A flashing image of being rendered naked, weak and helpless in her bed, roared through his brain. Ruthlessly he forced himself to drop her soft hand from his.

“Students must be a front,” he forced himself to answer. “They might have pooled their resources for hiring the sloppy mercenaries. But the monetary clout and

connections to purchase a new PRAX slingship armed with Zoni guns is a far different league.”

“Why did your friend say twenty-four hours? I thought the round trip would take only eight hours.”

“You’re right, but that would be taking two different public ships. We can’t risk it after the one exploded. PRAX are hard to come by in a hurry. Need to do maintenance on ours. How did you hear so well?”

Puzzled, Angeni didn’t know what to say. In spite of working hard at filtering, she’d heard parts of his conversation with his ship on some other psychic pathway. A strange one, like an untuned radio. He looked at her now with an odd, questioning expression on his face.

“Well? Answer me, Healer.”

Her anger fired at his brusque tone. She threw up her hands and turned her back to him. “Your portable com. I’m not sure how. I can’t tell you.” At the time, she hadn’t thought to question why she was hearing both sides of his com device. “Perhaps the adrenalin of worry.” Her talent for telepathy had never gone to eavesdropping before. She thought a minute. The other voice had not been Garek’s, of this she was certain.

His puzzled expression seemed to say we will find out later when we have more time.

She drew in an anxious breath. “I’m glad they have the other women safe.”

“Yes.” He was watchful, but apparently willing to drop the subject of her supernatural hearing for now.

Her head ached. Everything was moving so fast. She was alone in the company of the one male who had the power to confuse and confound her. He had a lock of hair falling over his left eye. Founders’ Saints help her, she wanted to touch that strand of hair.

“What about my father’s Security staff then? Do you believe they’re involved in this?”

“A possibility to consider.” His tone vibrated with professional control now. His whole being seemed to be on alert, his blue eyes laser focused. Had she been mistaken about the desire in his eyes moment’s ago? Perhaps. Best if she had.

“If someone on the Chancellor’s security staff is involved, our lives are not worth—

worth very little,” he revised.

“I can’t believe any of them would do this. They’re proud of their service to Olandia.”

“Still. We won’t trust them too far.”

“You’re a suspicious man.”

“It’s kept me alive.”

“With the shuttle discovered, where will we go from here?”

“You know Olandia far better than I do. If we were in the red mountains of Clothoes or the cloud forests of Vandor, I could come up with a few good hiding spots.”

Thoughtful, she said, “We may have something just as good. Forests and plants....”

“My father’s property borders Olandia’s botanical preserves at the farthest edge,” she continued.

“I’ve read of Olandia’s preserve,” he said. “For med supplies?”

“Yes. Medicinal plants are a priority.”

“Far?”

“Too far to walk.”

“What about transportation, Healer?”

“Stop calling me that.” The look on her face spoke of suppressed irritation. “I respect what you are trying to do. Maintaining a distance between us. I know you must be remembering my silly attachment to you in the hospital. I assure you I am no schoolgirl with a crush.”

She squared her shoulders and continued, “Can you ride a riderbeast, Captain Sahnjun?”

“Captain Sahnjun, again, hmmm?” Garek couldn’t resist pointing out she was as

formal as he, which royally annoyed her, judging from the frown and the flash of fire in her eyes. He missed the warmth of her fingers laced through his earlier.

“I can ride. Depends on what species of riding beast you have.”

“Good then. I keep some mounts in the preserve stables.”

“I’ve read of your riding classes with the injured children.”

She nodded.

“I trust it won’t be a large yellow bird.”

“Horses.”

“Horses are rare.”

“Yes, they are.”

Chapter Eight

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Minutes later, Angeni exited the underground tunnel to the surrounding terrain, Garek walked at her back, his weapon drawn. The soil beneath their feet was black sand, littered with dark, pitted volcanic rocks of varying sizes. The evening was well lit by Olandia’s three moons. The most distant one was Dandrovía.

He put away his weapon as they closed on the stable. They walked the rest of the way side by side. “You’re tall for an Olandian woman aren’t you?”

Her eyes jerked to his. “You’re observant.” She was so careful to avoid bringing attention to her height. No high-heeled shoes. Even the jewel-studded sandals she wore now were flat. He was staring at her nude toes. She wiggled them.

He grinned. “Observation has kept me alive. Sand in your shoes?”

“A little.”

Other than a few flashes in his eyes, he’d not shown one bit of personal interest in her. She should not be looking for his interest. She’d given up on having this man for herself. She was committed to The Cultural Exchange now. She sped up, leaving him behind for a moment.

“How well do you know Chancellor Oside?” she asked, changing the subject.

“We are age brothers.” He caught up with her quickly and gave her a tolerant look. A look that seemed to promise a return of the discussion of her height later. He was a very suspicious man. He would ferret out the secrets of her blood, if she let him.

“What do you mean by age brothers?”

“My people tend to associate and form allegiances by age groups. All people do. But it’s planned, encouraged in my culture. Coyle and I are close in age.”

“I’ve read that Chancellor Oside is Aldorian.” She held her breath awaiting his answer. She never spoke of Aldor, her mother’s home.

His blue eyes searched her face. “Yes, he is Aldorian. Coyle came to live with my family as a young boy. His mother abandoned him. Some are said to be telepaths or empaths, sixth-sense hearing.” He watched for her reaction. “Coyle says it’s all ancient mythology, posturing to frighten their enemies.”

Angeni held her breath, tension radiated through her. “I’m sure he’s right.”

He raised a brow, then continued walking, watching her like a bird of prey.

“Coyle and I served in the Guard together. And—” he paused, averting his eyes. “—he helped get my brother, by blood, out of a hostage situation a few years ago. I trust him with my life. Why do you ask how well I know him?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.” She waved a hand. “Maybe nothing.”

“Nothing?” He prompted.

“There’ve been vague rumors of misuse of Chancellor Oside’s guest privileges here.”

“How so?”

“They say he spends more time here, resting than on the duties for the district.”

Beside her, Garek stopped, took her arm and turned her to face him.

“Go on.”

She tugged her elbow away and frowned at him in warning.

“Froton Warrick, Oside’s appointed healer, claims to be overworked and understaffed due to the constant demands made upon him by the Chancellor and his people. Says he must spend a lot of his time at Blackford Hall, Oside’s Olandian residence. It’s a beautiful place.”

“Have you seen Coyle here on Olandia yourself?” he asked.

She thought about it a moment. “No...I haven’t. I’ve never met the man. He must be a very private person. He has not attended any event at our home since his term began.”

“Strange. In fact, Coyle says he’s never here. Claims he’s too young yet for his own convalescent home.”

“I see. That is very surprising in light of Froton Warrick’s reports.”

“Is Warrick the kind of man who would lie?”

She grasped for the tact and diplomacy required of a Chancellor’s daughter. “If it served his purposes, yes.”

“Good to know.”

When they reached the barn, she preceded Garek down the aisle way. On both sides

were rows of plasticrete stalls, without bars, so the animals could put their heads out and enjoy the fresh air. At their approach, the horses perked up their ears in interest and snorted greetings.

“If I’d anticipated riding,” Garek said, “I would have worn traditional Clothoes riding attire.”

He would have looked magnificent. She’d seen paintings and sculpture pieces depicting the primitive Clothoes male in riding attire, flowing robes of rich colors and natural fabric. In the past year she had done a bit of research.

Her stallion, snorted and then arched his neck and postured, warning Garek away from his mistress. “Aren’t they handsome? They’re named Nethe and Aza.”

Garek stepped close to the stallion and stared a long time, ignoring her question. “These are not normal horses, are they?”

She looked at him, surprised by his uncanny perception.

“They are winged,” he said.

She gasped.

“Aldorian flying warhorses. Troie or trogon, they’re called. Supposed to be extinct. Or myth.” He spoke the words with solemn tones.

“Yes, they are trogon. Troie is the Aldorian province in which they’re said to have been bred years ago. Most people cannot see the wings. How is it you can?”

The little mare nudged Angeni. Her foxy ears flicked back and forth, curious, hungry.

“Yes, they’re Aldorian warhorses with fully mature wings. Both have true black coloring. Very rare.”

“Apparently not extinct.”

“No, not yet.”

“Where did you find them?”

“I found them at a sale in a remote region.”

“A legal, Alliance-sanctioned sale?”

“Legal, yes, of course.” She glared at him. “I am no black marketeer. An elderly man bred them on a remote colony in secret for many years. I learned he died shortly after I purchased the pair. I knew they were special, but thought they were horses. When I bought them their wings were in juvenile form, much closer to their shoulders and withers than now. Impossible to see without close inspection.”

“Were there others?”

“A handful of other equine species, yes, mistars, and dragoponies.”

“So, there will be a few very surprised owners.”

“Not necessarily. The man never knew they were flying warhorses. They did not show him their wings. I assumed they would hide them from you as well. It has been their normal response to strangers. I don’t understand it.”

He nodded. “So, the owners might never know.”

“Exactly.”

“Good. We should have the Alliance investigate.”

“No!” She grabbed his arm. “No, please, they might experiment on them.”

He gave a curt nod. “I will wait, for now.”

“You can imagine my surprise when they turned out to be something more than I expected.”

She’d also been shocked, to say the least, by their first telepathic communication, but she so no reason to confide that to Garek, yet. She’d known of the myths of telepathic traits of Aldorians, of course, but had never believed it true, not before she acquired the warhorses. And her encounter with Garek reinforced the truth of the legends.

Garek stepped nearer, reaching out to stroke the soft fur of the mare’s wing. The wing

quivered in response as though his fingers were an annoying fly. Aza curved her elegant neck to see the hand on her wing, curious.

Nethe reared and plunged in his stall, shaking his head fiercely. The breeze off his wings sent her hair into disarray.

“Careful, he is possessive of his mate,” she said, hoping Nethe would not break his door.

Garek laughed. “And rightly so.” He was looking at her now. She looked away, unwilling to hold his gaze, wanting to tell him he’d lost his chance with her by leaving her behind.

“Amazing,” he said as he stroked the feathered wing. “Humans have always sought flying mounts of various sorts. You could name your price.”

“I don’t fly them. I have no desire to draw attention to them.” She sifted the mare’s long, silken mane through her fingers. “The preserve employees and volunteers mind their own business, but riding legendary Aldorian warhorses around the preserve forests would make the news.” She smiled. “They look like normal horses ... if they keep their wings close enough to their sides.”

“I can see that. An element of magic to them, I suspect.”

“No,” she argued.

“Magic does not exist.”

“What about healing chants?”

“I can’t say,” she answered stubbornly.

He laughed as if he remembered the chants she’d used to save him, but let it drop. “Legends say they’re mute.”

“Yes. It’s true. A wuffling noise or soft snorts they can manage, but not neighing like true horses.”

He frowned. “They have a deeply chiseled face, and a wild look in the eyes. Better to frighten the enemy.”

“Yes. They’re spirited, bold. And, independent and freedom loving. They prefer to roam the forest. I had them brought inside after the explosion.”

Angeni put a simple Aldorian warbridle on Nethe, a long cord of soft cotton, then led him from his stall. “They’re not easy to subdue or train, but loyal to the rider.”

“The right rider,” he said.

“Yes. For the right rider.”

With quick efficiency, she saddled the stallion, lengthening the stirrup leathers to the last hole and hoping they would be long enough for Garek. She often rode the stallion, allowing the pretty mare to follow along with them. But Garek’s height demanded the extra size provided by Nethe’s natural difference from the mare.

Garek did the same with Aza, talking to her in a soft, get-acquainted, voice. She playfully arched a wing out over him protectively. Angeni smiled, satisfied. He had the natural instincts of a herdsman. She need not worry for his safety riding the more headstrong stallion. He would not make the mistake of initiating a battle of wills with Nethe.

“I understand the horses on Clothoes are the size of small elephants?” she asked, curious.

He nodded in acknowledgement. “Those small elephants can carry a decent sized parade saddle instead of these small scraps of leather you’re putting on. In the years of warring between the clans, they could pull a munitions cart to hell and back.”

As he straightened away from the mare’s leg, his face clouded with something like sadness. In a more serious tone he added, “My people are not many generations from using their animals in territorial struggles. That much we have in common with the Aldorian breeders of these trogon.”

“I see.”

“We’re also suspicious and don’t trust easily.” Garek turned and led the mare to a set of ties further down the aisle way.

She watched him a moment. “The ancestors of the trogon were used to fly away with

other people's treasures."

Garek found himself laughing at Angeni's statement with surprised enjoyment. Their lives were in danger. She was his charge to guard and to protect. This was not a social visit.

He reminded himself that he didn't know this woman as well as he felt he did. He'd been fooled into thinking a woman's intentions were good in the past.

Trust no one but your comrades until the battle is over.

Now she looked puzzled. Hurt clouded her pretty eyes. She'd heard.

I've given you no reason not to trust me.

"Thought we weren't doing the telepathy thing," he said.

"We shouldn't. It won't happen again."

Chapter Nine

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On their way to the preserve, they rode the trogon through a glazed conservatory that arched high over them, an extra measure to protect the climate domes. Normally, she would not ride them here, but it was the shortest route. Overhead, colorful birds of all sizes flew from canopy to canopy. The air was alive with tropical floral scents. In places, thriving green plants edged across the sand path.

"Isn't it lovely and peaceful here?"

“Yes.” Garek sounded as if he were humoring her.

She suspected their surroundings felt forced and confining to him. Small when compared to the vast open spaces of a natural planet like his Clothoes. To a woman brought up on this otherwise barren sphere, it was a sanctuary.

“Will you miss your home when you give yourself to the Alliance?”

“You put it crudely.” Aza pranced, sensing Angeni’s sudden unease. She resented the pain he’d caused her with the question.

“You’re right. I did. Your arranged mating is none of my business.”

“You are correct. It is not.”

The first dome shimmered like a mirage up ahead.

“How do we travel from one of the domes to another?” She shifted around in the saddle to see him. His cold eyes observed her.

“All the dome surfaces will open for us. Like mist. At any point of approach. It’s an amazing thing.”

“What stops them from opening for the plants as they grow?”

“The sensors are programmed to recognize specific body temperature, also size and mass density. You’ll see when we reach the first dome segment. It’s less than a kilometer ahead.”

Suddenly, Aza reared off the ground. *Noise, danger!* Angeni stopped breathing at the trogon’s mental warning. She turned Aza around to face Garek and Nethe. The trogon mare’s long flowing mane flashed and billowed as she tossed her head and pranced. Angeni wondered how much she could explain this to Garek without giving him more to mistrust about her.

***Flying machine.* This came from the more analytical Nethe.**

“A shuttle is approaching,” she said. “We should make a run for the first dome. We’ll clear the barrier. Shuttles will not. The glazing above us breakable.”

“Makes sense.” He seemed watchful, unconvinced and puzzled. But he gathered the reins of the stallion in preparation to gallop.

“Hurry, Garek, we must hurry!” She squeezed the sides of the sleek mare with her calves and they surged forward.

Garek urged the stallion to follow Angeni.

He leaned close over Nethe’s neck, urging the strong animal forward. He could feel the wind on his face and the wings flexing beneath his knees. The warhorse yearned to be airborne, but was too well behaved to defy his training.

Only seconds later, Garek heard the unmistakable whine of a shuttle at top speed, getting closer, just above them. A quick glance over his shoulder as the stallion made another surge forward told him the shuttle had a Zoni gun down. By the looks of it, the gun was aimed at the lovely, yellow-haired woman up ahead and left of him. He constricted his calves around the trogon. The sensitive animal responded with an amazing burst of forward—and upward energy.

Hell. He’d forgotten the flying part. In air, wings surging up and down, his mount caught Angeni’s in seconds. Managing to balance, he leaned outward and circled her waist with one arm and transferred her upward and in front of him on the stallion, just as he heard a burst of fire from the shuttle. Turning it’s head sharply, he forced the powerful stallion to veer from their course. For a light second, they were sideways in the air.

A tree caught fire and began to smolder from a jagged, unnatural hole. Shards of glazing fell around them. The little mare followed a short distance behind, without the constraint of a rider, looping and diving to evade the fire.

They neared the dome. The shuttle closed fast, blasting another hole in the fragile greenhouse. At the visible mist barrier of the dome’s membrane, Nethe hesitated. Garek squeezed him again with his calves and Nethe broke through the mist. The mare followed just inches behind him.

The shuttle made hard contact with the membrane and careened backward with explosive force. Within seconds, the machine wobbled and crashed to the ground, breaking apart. The fire from the burning craft reflected off the moisture laden membrane rendering the arching dome visible above them.

The stallion came to ground, his front legs first.

“Guess they were unaware that shuttles are not allowed in the preserve,” Garek said. His breath was coming fast and hard. Pain scorched through his shoulder. Wood splinter or glass had hit him. He knew he held Angeni too tight, squeezing her lung capacity, but he was so glad she lived. He forced himself to relax his arms. It felt right, so good, to hold her against his chest. He did not want to release her.

The muscles in his forearms constricted and moved in rhythm with their breathing. For a moment he allowed himself to relax, to just hold her. He’d saved her life this time. He brushed his chin against her soft hair.

“The mare is limping,” she said. “Release me. I must check her.” She slid from his grasp, jumping to the ground. Her movement caused pain to explode through his shoulder. He suppressed a groan.

“I don’t think she was hit,” Garek offered. “Angel, what about you? Are you all right? Are you wounded?” His voice carried the urgency he felt.

“I’m fine. I just need to check the mare.” She ran her hands over the animal’s legs. She sighed in relief. “You’re right. It’s not serious.”

As Angeni turned to look up to him, relief for the trogon mare waned. She saw a spreading stain of blood at his shoulder. “You’re hurt.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Why didn’t you say something? Yell, ouch. Groan. Something.” *Stubborn male.* She ran toward him. *By the blood of the Saints! How were you holding me so tight with a wound like that?* she asked telepathically. To blazes with her vow not to use the unusual method of communication. “Let me see. Now,” she demanded. He winced, no doubt fighting the pain with everything he had. He fought not to lose consciousness. She needed him awake.

“Not yet. We’d better find cover. Put some distance between the shuttle wreckage and us. The crash gave us some time. But, if they survived, they may find a way to come in after us.”

“Yes, right. There’s a huge rock overhang and heavier tree cover near here. Hurry,

please. You could lose a lot of blood very fast.” He offered his good hand. Angeni vaulted onto Nethe’s back, this time behind Garek instead of in front. She leaned back, careful to put no strain on his shoulder.

“It’s not bad, Healer. Only a graze. Skin deep. Bleeding shoulder wounds look worse than they are. I’ve seen Guard hold a weapon and fight with this kind of wound.”

“Harrumph. I’m not surprised.” Angeni felt a cold dread. She was trying with only moderate success to stifle her fear for him. She hoped the weapon that injured him had not carried toxic chemicals. She’d caught a brief glimpse of a long, dark, cylindrical thing sticking out of a cockpit window. She was no weapons expert, but long, thin shafts usually propelled something.

Angeni directed Garek down a trail into a ravine. Aza followed behind, flying now to protect her injured limb.

We fly. I was not to fly before.

Yes, Aza, from now on we fly, Angeni replied telepathically.

Love to fly.

To Garek’s astonishment, he heard the exchange between the trogon and Angeni. Hell. It was more images, like a child’s storybook, than true words.

They soon reached the shelter of the rock. Garek showed no sign of chemical intoxication. The weapon hadn’t been poisoned. The telltale symptoms would have presented by now.

After he dismounted, she said, “Sit. Rest.”

He stretched his long legs out, and bending one leg at the knee, reclined against a tree. Quickly, she tore away his sleeve. Using disinfectant from the med kit, she cleaned the wound. He observed her actions in silence with only a wince or two.

“Take these. For the pain.” She handed him a packet of pain meds.

“What kind of weapon did they use?”

Angeni continued cleaning and dressing his wound with supplies from the med kit. “Zoni laser weaponry leaves no blood,” she said, as she poured a cauterizing liquid over his gash.

“They often leave no body.”

“Yes, well ... ,” she replied, trying to control her rebelling stomach. Her training in the healing sciences had not prepared her for the black horror of imagining this man of her heart vaporized by a laser. No being for that matter.

“I would say it was old style. My guess, a hunting weapon of some type aimed at one of the animals.”

“Hunting is not permitted here.”

He smiled a handsome, tolerant smile, leaning his head back against the tree trunk. “Admirable policy.”

She smiled back. “I know, I know. They wouldn’t abide by our laws.”

“This means the people behind this action would like to capture you alive. But it is not high on their list of priorities.”

“Why do you say that?” she asked, not quite seeing the connection.

“If they cared more about capturing you than stopping you, they could have waited for closer contact and used a short-range stunner. If they’d wanted to be dead sure of stopping us, they would have used the Zoni laser mounted out the belly of the shuttle.”

“I see.” Her stomach lurched again. “I’m relieved they failed to kill you. And Aza.”

“Untrained bastards were not smart enough to see how harmful it could be to shoot the animal out from under you. Or cause that tree they blasted to Hades to fall on you.”

“Be still. You’ll start bleeding again.”

“Why is it so cold?”

“It’s cold because this is a facsimile of Old Mother Earth temperate climate in late fall

season. The fact that you've lost some blood compounds the cold."

"Well, let's thank heavens we did not enter the frozen arctic tundra dome." His mouth quirked even as he shivered.

"Yes," she replied, serious, trying her best to smile. "We can camp here. Use the thermal sleeping wraps tied to the saddle cantles. Combine them into one and sleep close to conserve warmth," she suggested. She freed one of the blankets and wrapped it around him as she spoke. The terror of the past minutes swamped her. She sat and looked at him for a long moment.

He must have read her feelings, because he said, "Come here, Angel." Without overthinking the matter, she moved to him. He circled her with his good arm and held her close.

"That's it," he praised. *Let me hold you. You can be angry with me later.*

She came close, then hesitated. "You will hurt your shoulder."

He ran a large hand over her hair. Her pulse surged.

She snuggled into his good arm.

His voice rumbled near her ear, singing one of her healing chants. She smiled and joined him.

Garek relished her warmth, her feminine form. It was a joyous gift to hold her this way. He must release her. He would do so. Now... soon. His pain was forgotten.

He marveled at her courage and determination. A man could get too used to this lady's nearness. He could feel her smiling, nestled against his shoulder. She belonged there, he thought with an aggressive surge of possessive certainty.

He tightened his hold. He began to understand the motivation of males who turned to evil in the pursuit of a female's affection.

She leaned back. Her frown of worry for his safety was intoxicating.

"We can't stay here," he forced himself to say. "We'll have to keep moving until Coyle

returns.” Garek tried hard to suppress the sexual fantasy stimulated by Angeni in his arms. He would explore her ribcage, trace a path along her waist, and across the hollow at the base of her spine. Take his time tasting her breasts.

He closed his eyes, tormenting himself with the fantasy.

“That could be another twenty hours or so,” she said, interrupting his pleasant thoughts.

“Hmmm? Yes. A long time to run and hide.”

“Garek, with your injury, we can’t just keep moving all that time.”

“It’s just a graze. Heal in a day.”

“Still.”

“A moving target is harder to spot.” He stroked her hair, sifted it through his fingers. “I’d like to spend time at Blackford Hall going through the computers for some answers.”

Angeni relished this stolen contact with him. She fought to be still and keep her hands to herself. He smelled so good. She struggled to hide from him her thoughts of lovemaking. The feel of his muscled legs against hers was all she could think of.

She forced her thoughts to their options. “We could go back underground, near here are other entrances.”

“People?”

“Only a few ever go down in the safety tunnels. We can take the trogon in and ride them there. They’re used to it.”

“Why would you choose to exercise them underground with a forest nearby?” He gave her a suspicious look.

She shrugged, moving away from him. He pulled her back.

“You see ... er ... the semi-darkness helps improve my balance,” Angeni improvised,

trying to cover. She'd become good at not quite lying over the years. She might not need to keep her mother's true ancestry a secret from this man, but years of habit made it second nature for now.

She could not reveal that she must avoid the sun because she was half Aldorian. The sun would tan her skin darker than the pale color of Olandians.

"You are not telling me the truth."

She looked away. "Some things are private."

He stiffened. "I see."

"Thermo scans would not be as effective underground," she said, changing the subject.

"You're right."

Angeni sighed and laid her head on his shoulder again. He was accepting her story for now. She wanted to cling to him like this forever. Why had this same attraction not happened with any other man? Ever. How could that be adaptive? A woman might never meet the right man and never pass on her genes.

Garek was looking at her, waiting. How long had she been thoughtful, fantasizing that he would make love to her here on the cold ground? She forced herself to smile back with as much calm as she could manage.

"Let's get to the safety tunnels then. Find the nearest entry. My balance on these flying creatures could use some refinement."

She laughed and said, "You're a skilled rider." Her cheeks flushed, thinking of something else entirely.

"Are there any preserve personnel down there?"

"Yes. A few security guards are stationed near the city, no regular patrols." Angeni forced her thoughts to the issue at hand and continued, "Something else..." She began and then hesitated. "We could use the passages to reach the city again and check Blackford Hall."

Garek set her aside and pulled himself up. "Good."

* * * *

“You lost them, mercenary?” Steel-cold eyes bored into him. They were on a PRAX ship in route to Olandia.

“Ahem,” he cleared his throat, “yes.”

“First, your men blew the transport, murdering the Olandian guards and killing themselves, when I needed only a minor delay until I could get travel there. Now this. Idiots. Mindless idiots.”

He edged toward the door. The man across from him had a commanding presence that bred fear. His survival instincts screamed for retreat. The legends and rumors of the other man’s ruthlessness replayed in his thoughts. Oside was an Aldorian warlord. Once an Alpha lord. The younger man, Reihl Samaras, had recently won Oside’s place. Some said Samaras had demanded a bride from Oside’s clan as battle spoils, in exchange for letting Oside live.

“What went wrong on Olandia this time?” Oside asked. “Their security force is nothing. No crime to deal with. No need to fight the other dogs for scraps. Security guards are mostly pensioners from the forces of other colonies. Getting a few women out of there should have been easy. Swift and clean. Even on the second try. Where is she now?”

“Uh ... someone got to her before we could, sir. Took her out an underground exit tunnel into a nature preserve. My men crashed a shuttle against a climate dome. Followed them into the tunnels. They’ll check in soon with good news, I assure you.”

“Who took her?” Oside’s fierce eyes were relentless. He took a step back and came up against the entry door.

“Don’t know, sir. Our informant said Coyle Oside took the other women. Maybe he got the Chancellor’s daughter too.”

The steel eyes flashed molten. “So, my estranged son interferes in my affairs again. If I’d found him while he was still a child, things would be different. He would work at my side. Follow my orders.” He raked a hand through his silver and black hair and began to pace his quarters.

“Yes sir.”

“Sahnjun took the girl. Or, Hane that Muscovan demon from Hades that guards my son. Yes, Sahnjun, I wager. Hane would stick with my offspring.”

The mercenary was puzzled by the revelations, not following the family details. He worried about his own escape from the room at the moment. He reassured himself by finding the door release.

“Perhaps you and your men are not so stupid, mercenary. Just over-faced by the caliber of your opposition.”

The eyes cooled to shards of ice again.

“In the old days, a man could find enough men with hungry children to build an excellent army. Now, thanks to the meddlesome Alliance, it’s a challenge indeed. Get out. And tell Lucius Lendow to explain his own failures in the future.”

Chapter Ten

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The unfinished subways felt cool and damp like caves, but bore the unmistakable materials of civilized architecture, advanced plasticrete. The ceiling gave off a phosphorescent glow. Gentle, re-circulated air brushed the skin. Functional cargo lifts were already installed in strategic locations. Only the muffled clip-clop of the trogon’s hooves and the occasional sound of some small creature moving in the semi-darkness disturbed the silence.

As Angeni led the way, she wondered what Garek was thinking. He’d maintained an introspective silence for some time now. No doubt he wondered how she’d known that

shuttle was coming. Her telepathic gift was hard enough for her to understand. No wonder he was suspicious. She did not blame him. It made some sense, she had to admit. There was no way to allay his concerns without telling him her entire story. She didn't feel like doing so. The man had left her. He hadn't trusted in their bond then. Why should he now.

"No civilians visited you on the Sanctuary," she said. "I assumed it was the distance."

"Right." Garek stopped Nethe and reached for Aza's bridle bringing her to a halt too. He looked dangerous as though he would rather not answer and was intent on discouraging more questions. "My grandmother and parents were too far away for a visit. But my younger brother came once. Damned angry with me at the time. Still is."

"I didn't know of his visit."

"It was brief."

"What happened between to cause anger between you?" Angeni asked.

"Rehne worked for a commercial transport company a few years after PRAX tech began. Just out of an Alliance engineering school, very young. One of only a handful of people trained in the new tech."

"I see," she prompted.

"Much too young for the kind of pressure he faced. Wasn't accustomed to the lifestyle he could buy for himself with the money he made. He was duped into carrying contraband cargo. Some of it turned out to be high-jacked genetics. Founders' DNA."

She gasped. "Oh, heavens, not the Founders." She could tell he saw her disgusted shock before she could hide it.

He looked away, embarrassed by his brother's mistakes, she knew, not meeting her eyes.

"Rehne came to his senses and wanted out. But he wasn't working with amateurs. The smuggler boss, a young Aldorian making a name for himself, refused to let him leave. My brother managed to get a message to me."

"He came to you for help? That's good."

He nodded. “Coyle and I talked the Security Service into letting us go in after him as an official Alliance covert operation.” He paused.

“Things got complicated fast. Ambush.”

“But you succeeded?”

“We did.” He softened his hold on the reins allowing Nethe to walk again. Aza followed.

“Why is your brother angry with you then?” she asked, indignant for him.

“I made a deal to keep him out of a prison colony. They assigned him to me in a guardianship for a five-year period. I control his assets. Rehne claimed he’d prefer the prison.” His smile reflected the irony. “And my fiancée preferred Rehne.”

She gasped. Garek looked bemused that he shared so much. His cheeks flushed a charming red.

“Conniving woman!”

“She was caught in a situation not of her making.”

“I’m sure he did not really mean he would prefer jail. How unreasonable for him to hold you responsible for his problems. Perhaps he’s jealous of his wife. Er...rather of your former relationship to his wife. Insecure, uncertain of her affection,” she said, waving her hand in search of answers.

He inclined his head in thoughtful agreement. “Rehne and I might have worked things out. The personal matter made things worse. Much worse.”

“I’m sure.” Angeni was curious for more details. But felt she’d prodded as much as she dared. It appeared his pride was still wounded by his former fiancée. Her own uncertainty of where she stood with him, even where she wanted to stand with him, resurfaced.

“There is very little brother-to-brother affection left. It has been a difficult year.”

Guiding her trogon closer, she touched his arm. “He will come to understand you

helped him.”

He looked down at her hand. “Maybe he will. Someday.”

“Yes. For your sake, I hope so. This is unfinished business. Families cannot afford unfinished business.”

“Yes,” he agreed.

The mare jerked her head up. *Human. Near.* The image came through less garbled this time, less urgent than with the approach of the shuttle. The ears of both were pricked forward, alert with healthy, everyday caution.

“Someone’s coming. Could be a preserve ranger.”

“How do you know this?” Garek interrupted. “I hear nothing, Angeni, no echo of footsteps. Nothing.”

She held up a hand. “Wait, please. You will hear. Soon. They know me here, but we can’t risk letting them see you. A lift. There,” she gestured toward a bank of cargo elevators ahead. “Hide in there. Go. Be quick. Please!” As Angeni urged him toward the double steel doors, she noticed he had pulled a lethal-looking hand weapon out of his belt.

“And put your weapon away. I’m sure I know the person coming. He will not harm me.”

Garek’s expression was filled with stubborn puzzlement. He was clearly reluctant to seek shelter on her word.

She gathered her reins up tighter and took the stallion’s. “I come to the preserve often. I know most of the personnel,” she offered in explanation. “Please get off and go into the lift. With the doors open, you can see well from there, but he cannot see you. If any violent actions are needed...”

Garek hesitated, but finally moved to do as the lady asked. He jumped to the ground and gave her one last look. His lioness was back, in force. She could put that pleading look in those beautiful, tawny-brown eyes, and he would jump into flames for her.

A few minutes later, an older man wearing a dark blue uniform with a silver pocket

badge appeared in the dimness of the passage up ahead of them. Garek closed his hand over his weapon.

“Who’s there?” A man called, slight quavering in his voice. It was a fair indication he posed no threat to her. Garek relaxed some.

“Healer Traek, Officer Colin.”

She did know the man. As she’d guessed, he was a preserve official.

“Exercising your horse beasties are you, ma’am? What pretty things they are. Look almost magical, all black and fierce, standing on either side of you there, like your royal bodyguards.” He chuckled and came closer to rub the mare’s muzzle. Aza wuffled a greeting and made a brief and less than subtle search of the man’s pockets for treats.

Garek returned his weapon to safety.

“Yes, in fact I’m going to keep them out all night in the tunnels,” Angeni said. “Get them used to doing without the comforts of home, you see.”

Good lie, Garek thought. It was a plausible enough explanation for her presence in the preserve so late.

“Now, you might want to change your mind about that, ma’am. Security Service has a search on for a man who stole a shuttle.” He removed his uniform cap to scratch his scalp.

“What is going on?” Angeni asked, steady calm in her voice.

The lady was cool under pressure.

“Don’t want to frighten you, but I heard mercenary thugs blew up a transport, then a little while ago crashed a shuttle into the temperate dome membrane. Word is the shuttle survivors entered the preserve on foot. Armed and dangerous.”

“Heavens.”

“Yes, the Founder’s Saints would be shocked by it all. We don’t get that kind of thing

here on the science colony. Figured the bad guys wouldn't know about these subways right away, so I'm headed home this way. Let the Chancellor's Security tangle with the lunatics, I say. They're more trained for that, you know? I'd go on back to the surface if I were you. I would. Your father will worry."

"Thank you for your concern," she said.

"Heard something about you taking part in something. What'd they call it? Cultural exchange or some thing. The wife says it's a brave thing to do. We lost a grandchild to the genetic illness, you know." The elder man looked sad, remembering. He swiped a tear from his eye.

"I didn't know. I'm sorry."

"Never mind that." He smiled weakly. "We don't speak of it often. We will miss you for sure here at the preserve. But we have to help the little ones. Couldn't afford the treatment for ours."

"Yes, you, too, Officer Colin. And thank you for the advice. Say hello to Mrs. Colin for me.

"Will do."

"Are they sure the mercenaries from the shuttle came into the preserve? Is the Security Service sure they weren't killed in the crash?"

Garek was impressed with her tone, which conveyed the thought had just occurred to her.

"They say the scans showed no remains of life. No bone. No skin."

"Any debris from cybernetic mechanicals?"

"Hmmm? Oh, you mean a bot pilot. No, none. There've been some questionable colors on preserve heat sensor screens. Could be them. Or you and your horses even. Hard to tell for sure."

"Yes, I suppose so."

Good, Garek thought, just what they needed for their own safety.

“You hurry on home, now. Turn your beasties loose in the preserve. They’ll be just fine. I’ll see they’re fed for you.”

When the older man set off down the passageway, Angeni leaned against the wall. *Home. The idea of going home is appealing to a woman hiding two winged horses and a very tall, very broad-shouldered man from only the Saints knew whom. Very appealing. Her own bed, a warm drink of kindo bean cocoa.*

From his hiding spot, Garek grinned at her thoughts. “You said there were no patrols down here,” he said, stepping out.

She stiffened and fisted her small hands at his words.

Hell. He couldn’t communicate clearly with her even with the telepathic connection they shared.

Suspicious of my motives again? I grow tired of it. I have given you no reason not to trust me.

Garek winced as the mental message forced its way into his head. Hell in space, the telepathy could be used as a weapon. Until now, Angeni must have muted it. He’d quickly learned from her, the methods of erecting basic barriers in his mind, but she was angry now and the stop-gates were open.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have done that,” she admitted. But her eyes sparkled with anger.

“Mistrust is not always a reasonable feeling,” he growled. “You are a woman with secrets. I feel it.”

“Those secrets are not mine to share.”

He stepped toward her and took hold of her upper arms. “Fair enough. As long as they do not get us killed!”

Driven, he leaned in, a breath away from her lips. When she closed her eyes and moved to meet him, he grasped her chin and took control of her face. He molded her lips with his. She deepened the kiss. Fire drove through his body, shaking him, nearly buckling his knees.

After a moment, she jerked her mouth away, then swiped her hand across it as if to remove his touch. The hurt of that action exploded through him. She was angry with him for leaving her a year ago.

He released her. “What was the officer saying?” He forced himself to ask. “I couldn’t hear everything in that lift,” he lied. For some fool reason, he needed to test her, to learn how much she would tell him.

“Mr. Colin just thought it safer to go through the passageways on his trip home. Nothing more complicated than that. No secret messages were exchanged.”

“Hell. I didn’t say there were.”

“You did not need to,” she spat back.

“I’m sorry,” he said, then took her arm and tried to pull her back into his arms. She resisted at first, surprising him with her strength. But suddenly she relented and stepped to him. With feminine power and grace, she took control. She kissed his throat, lathing it with her soft tongue, then nipping with her teeth. He sucked in a deep, unsteady breath. He braced his legs to remain standing.

“Garek, what do you do to me?” she demanded to know.

He laughed. “Not me. You cause the magic, woman.”

Her small hands kneaded his back muscles, going lower and lower.

He toyed with the edges of her dress, sliding up, teasing the soft skin beneath with his fingers. She welcomed his touch, leaning into his questing fingers.

“Public place. Can’t do this here,” he rasped.

She jumped away from him. The ties of the dress fell apart, loosened by his hands. The unraveled strips were sexy as hell, even more so than when tied up.

“Of course not. You’re right,” she agreed. She looked around, her cheeks flushed a glorious pink.

He raked a hand through his hair, frustrated. He missed her warmth against his body.

He strode toward her.

She shrank away.

“Just going to help you up on the trogon,” he said.

“Oh, no, don’t. Please don’t touch me again. I can make it.” And she was up in one athletic movement. She wouldn’t look at him. It caused a chilling pain near his heart.

“You should know. Officer Collin said no bodies were found at the crash site,” she said stiffly. “The climate dome acted as a buffer, saving them.

“The survivors could be close behind us,” he said.

“Security Service thinks the shuttle you used was involved.”

“Olandian Security thinks whoever took that shuttle is one of the mercenaries.”

“Yes,” Angeni replied. “I’m sure my father will make them understand the truth soon. But in the meanwhile, you’re in more danger. If I could talk to him....”

“We can’t risk trying to contact the chancellor. The coms down here could be monitored.”

“Any message might be intercepted then?”

“Right. We have no shuttle now. We’re safer down here than on the surface. They can only approach from one or the other end of the tunnel. If they use the lift, we’ll hear the air discharges and guess at their nearness by the sound. We’ll travel deeper in for a while longer, then set up for the night.”

“Fine.”

*** * * ***

Garek unrolled the sleeping wraps, spreading them on the hard plasticrete floor. Olandia got cold at night. They needed to sleep together for warmth. With the two trogon close by, the grouping would offer a confusing image to any scanning equipment.

Hell. How was he going to keep his hands off her? Especially after the kiss earlier. An honorable man would not take advantage of their circumstances. The stress of running for their lives had no doubt heightened his sexual awareness. As if he needed the added push to find her appealing. He already found her more attractive than any other woman he'd ever encountered.

He vowed to claim her as his. Somehow. He swiped a hand across his face. A primitive thought. Stallions claimed their females, men were chosen by the female. It was the civilized order of things.

The Clothoes Matrimonial Law! Blazes, how could he have forgotten? By Clothoes law, Angeni would be his wife if they stayed together tonight. He glanced toward her as she fed the trogon.

Maybe he need not tell her? No one would know but him. He didn't need to bother Angeni with his world's archaic laws. He could protect her from all that by his silence. But the Clothoes matrimonial law could make her his, a small mental voice whispered enticingly. Might be the only chance he had to steal her away from the Alliance's Cultural Exchange.

Her kisses were sweet. Worth any cost.

“What do we have to eat?”

She rummaged through the pack he brought now.

Torn, Garek drew in a deep breath and knelt down with her. “I need to tell you—something.”

She looked up from her task. “Yes.”

“There's another consideration in our current situation,” he spoke quickly.

“Go on.”

“On my world, a man and woman are married by law, if they spend a night together.”

Her pretty eyes went wide with surprise.

“Dates back to ancient customs. To a time when desperate measures were needed to

quell the warring nature of my people. Stealing the daughters and wives of the enemy had become sport. Too often they were abandoned afterward.”

“I see. If a man and woman make love, they’re married by Clothoesian law? We stopped just in time then.”

“I said, spending the night together. I meant inhabiting, without a certified Clothoesian Jona council chaperone, the same premises.”

“You sound as if you quote the law exactly.”

“Yes, close. To keep things simple and straight forward, making love together is assumed.”

She waited. She narrowed her eyes. “You don’t seem amused.”

“I’m not amused by this, trust me.”

“You’re serious—” She threw up her arms. “Saints, what a ridiculous, oppressive idea. Especially for extraordinary circumstances such as these. There are nameless, faceless people who want to capture us.”

“Stop. Yes, true.”

“Can’t you appeal? You’re too honorable to take advantage of a situation like this. Your people must know that.” Her eyes pleaded. She was pacing back and forth now, agitated. Her slender hands expressed the emotion in her words. Oddly, he noticed her nail coloring matched her garment.

“I appreciate your confidence in me,” Garek said, humbled that she trusted him when he still withheld his complete trust in her. He planned to take every advantage. His conscience was somewhat appeased by informing her ahead of time. His first thought had been to keep it from her in case she circumvented their night together somehow.

“Well, I er ... enjoyed our ... ah ... kissing. You didn’t force me. Are there exceptions made?”

“No exceptions are granted,” he continued. “It would be unheard of.”

“I could sleep in the elevator.”

“Personalities and circumstances are not considered. Only proximity. Too few females for too many years. Our culture is very protective of women and children. They are revered. A few generations ago, the men of my ancestors worshiped female deities.”

“Female deities, hmm?”

The lady’s indignant expression was amazing. “This is a practical way to protect our females.”

“I knew women held a lot of power in your society but I find the idea of forced marriages, well...primitive.”

“We do not publicize the law.”

“So, we’re matebonded by Clothoes law if we share a bed?” She looked disgusted again.

“What’s wrong?” Suddenly angered he said, “What do you find so distasteful? How is that so different from what you’ve volunteered for?”

There was a pause before she answered. “The Cultural Exchange is different.”

“It is?” He was doubtful.

“Yes. I believe it is.” Her pretty little chin stuck out, but he read doubt in her expression.

“It seems to me you’re in this situation because you want to find a husband, right?” Garek ignored her wince. He was angry. “Did you picture some pretty, polished, fancy-mannered, modern man as a mate? Another Prime Healer, perhaps?”

“Garek, do not mistake my meaning. It is not that I would object to you as a mate, not at all,” she said. Yes, I volunteered for The Cultural Exchange,” she continued.

“Heavens, who knows how this affects my participation in the exchange?”

“Did you think this Cultural Exchange meant you would tour museums with the mate chosen for you?”

Angry, she stamped a foot, startling the trogon who dozed nearby. “Of course not. It’s the idea of forced marriage I rebel against. You would be forced to bond with me. Against your will—”

“Or is your motivation your father’s political career?” Garek interrupted.

“You’re not listening to me. You’re so blasted accepting of it all.”

“Angeni—”

“You deserve better.”

He raked a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry about all this. But I had to make you aware of the situation with Clothoes law—Let you know you could end up with two husbands from this adventure.” He laughed harshly.

“You and a mate from the Alliance’s Cultural Exchange. I get it. Not funny.”

“Coyle could have sent a third person to protect you tonight. I should have anticipated this.”

“How? He had to go get the others,” she said. “I would never hold you to this,” she whispered.

Damn it all, her eyes held such feminine compassion.

He nodded curtly. He did not tell her that if she released him, it would end his last chance at marriage and family. He had been rejected once before. He’d lost valuable time with the long, stalling betrothal to a woman who had wanted his brother instead. In the Clothoes marital ritual, a man was not afforded a third chance. Too many other men waited for a try.

“We need to get some rest now,” he said abruptly. “I’m going to take a look around while you prepare for sleep.”

*** * * ***

Hours later, Garek was wide-awake and lying rigid next to a warm and sweet-smelling Angeni. He tugged at the thin blanket wraps. The warhorses were nearby. The mare was lying down and the stallion stood guard over her.

“I know how you feel, friend,” Garek whispered to the stallion. “We have to watch out for our ladies.”

His look around had been part security and part excuse to avoid the intimacy of getting in the wraps while she was awake. Sharing a bed with her and not touching her was punishment. Combining their sleeping wraps was the best protection from scans, no question. When he’d finally joined her at last, she’d been restless and shivering in her sleep. He’d felt a selfish bastard for denying her his warmth.

Now, with a resigned sigh, Garek drew her to him, molding her back to his front. She wiggled into him in her sleep, mumbling happily, as though she had done so a thousand times before. Her warmth seemed to burn through his clothing. He closed his eyes in pain. “What happened to us, Geni?” Garek whispered the question in a hoarse voice.

She murmured something unintelligible.

***You feel so good in my arms,* he awkwardly sent a mental message.**

She snuggled impossibly closer, as if she heard.

Garek felt heat for the woman spread through his being, a fire of deep sexual need. He closed his arms around her waist and softly kissed the top of her head.

Chapter Eleven

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The next morning, Angeni awoke with a start. She turned and found Garek’s nose only an inch from hers. Her heart skipped a beat. His harsh masculine features were softened by sleep. Helplessly she reached out to smooth his tousled hair, winding a curl

around her finger. She could not resist it.

She felt a wave of guilt. This was not the first time they'd slept this way. Close enough to feel his breath. Now that she knew more of his culture's taboos, she knew he would be shocked. She'd held him still through the worst of his post-operative days. She frowned. By his people's bizarre matrimonial law, they'd been married for a year now. He had not mentioned love. Pain of having her heart's desire so close ... but so contorted pierced her heart. She didn't want him to owe her a marriage of duty? She would be no different than his former fiancée? A tear dropped from her eye.

She traced the relaxed crease of one of his dimples with her fingertip. He grumbled a word or two that she could not understand. Clothoes native language, maybe, rather than the chosen language of the Alliance.

A year ago, when he'd torn at his medical hardware, delirious from inhuman pain, perhaps she should've ordered heavier straps to keep him still and left him alone with Sidra to watch him. She had not.

Their second meeting was disorienting to her peace of mind.

He moved in his sleep, throwing an arm over her, sheltering her. She closed her eyes and savored the contact a while. Her body responded. His arm tightened, pulling her against him, hard. She held her breath.

Angel? His eyes were closed.

I'm here, she answered.

He relaxed in her arms. He was a beautiful man, with broad shoulders and muscling. Even his hands were attractive to her. Large with long, tapered fingers. She reached out to caress the light smattering of dark hair on the top of his hand as it rested on her breast. He stirred.

She looked up to find his eyes open and staring at her. Heavens.

“Angeni?” She leaned to him and pressed her lips to his. He returned her light kiss with wonderful pressure. He captured her bottom lip with a gentle clamp of his teeth. She whimpered and sucked in a labored breath.

The depth of his body's response to her tentative touch surprised and pleased her. His

arms tugged her closer, aligning her perfectly to his harder frame, then stroking her hips. She gasped, arching into him helplessly. He devoured her neck, her ears. And next the bare tops of her breasts, lathing them in turn with his tongue. The sensations rocked through her and she moaned against his soft hair.

“Garek.”

Garek rolled away from Angeni with startled wakefulness, wincing as his rapid movement tore at his injured shoulder. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I must have been dreaming. Didn’t mean to grab you.”

“No, it was...”

“Won’t happen again. Get up. We’d better get moving soon.”

Angeni watched Garek’s rapid retreat from the makeshift bed with painful disappointment. He looked guilty. Heavens above, she’d made the grab for him, not the other way round.

Hungry, food? Nethe demanded, interrupting her thoughts and dragging her mind from the lovely haze of sexual arousal.

Flying soon? Aza asked. They looked rested and too cheerful.

“The trogon are hungry,” she said to Garek. “I need to feed them.”

Garek struggled to regain control of his breathing, his mind, his hands, his whole flocking body. His heart pounded. His hands shook. She was his to protect and not take advantage of. He could jeopardize any chance at a future with her if he made love to her too soon.

Something clicked in place, nudging through the fog of his sexual need. How was it she was so in tune to the trogon anyway? Aldorian legends spoke of mental communication with the flying horses. It had taken him long enough to make the connection. Could Angeni be an Aldorian telepath? The warhorses existed after all and she was a natural telepath. The pieces fit and explained her knowledge of the approaching shuttle, the preserve officer. If she was an Aldorian telepath, she could not be Olandian. But why not tell him the truth? She might be an imposter. His soft and sexy bed partner might be collaborating in some elaborate political scheme.

No! The sharp word pounded into his mind. She looked at him with fire in her eyes.

He was unsure what to say. *A man's crazy thoughts should remain private, Angel, he said along a mental path. A suspicious mind—*

I know, I know, your suspicions have kept you alive.

Now she was clothed again in the ragged dress and storming away. She looked back over her shoulder. *By the way, I kissed you first.*

*** * * ***

“We’ll have to wait here until the PRAX returns,” Garek said, when they’d reached the lift exit nearest Blackford Hall, Coyle Oside’s guesthouse on Olandia. He’d pushed them hard to make it there.

“He’s due in less than three hours?”

“Yes. I’ll take your trogon up and turn them loose in the preserve. They’ll find their way back to the stables.”

“No. No,” Angeni protested aloud. She realized she was over-reacting and continued more calmly. “No, we must keep them with us.” She tried to think of an explanation for her unwillingness to leave them behind.

He folded his arms at his chest, looking unwilling to comply. “Why?” he asked.

She forced herself to ignore the effect he had on her pulse rate. He looked forceful and too attractive.

“We need them.” Should she reveal to Garek the truth of her bloodlines and the bond with the trogon? She clenched her fists. He’d walked away from her. Could she trust him with her secret? For years she’d resented the legacies from her Aldorian mother, and the differences from her Olandian people. Her telepathic bond with the trogon and with Garek fell solidly into that category—solidly Aldorian.

Now she found, for the first time in her life, she needed her primitive heritage. The watchful trogon had helped keep them safe.

“Dammit, you can trust me with the truth. You want the trogon close so you can use them as telepathic watchdogs.”

After a long silence, she lifted her chin and stared back. “Yes. That’s true.”

“You can hear their thoughts?”

“Yes.”

“I thought so. I’m getting some pictures from them, too.”

“You are? You were testing me then.”

He walked up close and softly captured her chin. “Never lie to me, Angel.” His anger seemed to cool at once. His fingers stroked her chin, then his palm cupped her cheek.

“A lifetime’s secrets are hard to let go,” she whispered.

“I know,” he said, then brushed a quick kiss across her lips.

She drew back from him. “But I did not lie to you. I simply saw no reason to tell you everything.”

He smiled and kissed her again, as if a casual, everyday occurrence between them, then he went on speaking, his breath heavenly warm. “Stay here. I’m going aboveground to check out the security measures.” He kissed her deeply, finishing what he’d started, setting her away from him reluctantly.

“Can you use one of these?” He handed her a weapon. Alliance issue blaster laser.

“No,” she replied but she took it. He showed her the basics of operating it. The thing fit the hand perfectly, she noticed. It was clearly made of dense depex fiber, the colors and symbols of the Alliance emblazoned on it. He programmed it for stun, with a sequence of buttons and pushing forward a tiny, flattened switch.

“Take the trogon into the cargo lift cabin and tie them. If anyone comes along—I don’t care if it is one of the preserve guards—you go in with them and stay.”

“But—” she began.

“No arguments.”

Exasperated by his tone, Angeni fumed. “Yes, Captain Sahnjun, sir,” she snapped. “I’ll try not to stun my foot with your fancy little hand gun.”

Garek smiled his magnificent smile, shaking his head and melting her anger at once.

“I’ve been called worse than Captain, Prime Healer, but your tone is not wasted on me.” He came close and kissed her gently on the forehead.

He waited long seconds.

She tilted her chin up and stared at him.

“Please?” He said.

She waved a hand. “Fine, fine,” she said, giving him her grudging agreement.

*** * * ***

Humans coming. Strange humans. We should fly. This time there was more than caution, there was a touch of primal fear in the thought coming from Nethe. The time since Garek had left her had dragged mercilessly. She was almost relieved for this interruption of the monotony. The stallion lifted his wings in automatic flight response, front legs coming off the ground. His hooves clattered and slipped on the surface of the cargo lift. Aza shied and stepped closer to his side.

Easy, Nethe.

Your mate would want us to fly.

He’s not my mate. She stopped, realizing the absurdity of arguing with a trogon.

Garek had been gone exactly two hours. Angeni sat, her legs crossed, on the rolled up sleeping wrap. The gray steel doors of the lift cabin hiding the trogon were open behind her. She picked up the sleep wraps and slipped into a small utility recess in the subway wall next to the lift, so that she still had a view of the subway.

She flattened her slender form to the cold surface. Perhaps not exactly what Garek had

had in mind when he'd said stay put. She couldn't hide and do nothing. She needed to know what had spooked the warhorses. Angeni's fingers touched the weapon Garek had given her.

Minutes later, she heard voices in passageway.

A man said, "Walking our legs off through these cold tunnels is pointless. Why would they wander around down here? They're long gone by now."

"Aw, shut up, Taynor, I'm tired of your whining. You heard Lendow say the woman was often down in these fuming subways. Just keep moving. Our orders are to stop them before they get to Blackford Hall. Lendow wants them kept away from there. I don't know what's in that place, but it must be important. Just keep thinking about the Alliance currency we'll get for killing Sahnjun and delivering the woman to Lendow."

Angeni stepped from the wall, facing the approaching men. With cold decisiveness, she fingered the switch and reset the gun to full power, broadening the beam to include both men. A definite tech advantage.

"Stop!" She demanded.

"What the hell! Who's there?"

The words came from the leader.

"Remove your weapons." When too much time passed and they did not comply, Angeni lifted the angle of her laser a degree and fired. A shower of rock and debris from the opposite wall sprayed on the two men. She noticed the one man was now prone. Unconscious. Likely concussed. Good, she thought, with savagery. She steadied her hand on the weapon. "I said remove your weapons, all weapons."

"Are you a mental case, woman?"

"Do it, and you might live, mercenary."

"You'll bring this bleeding subway down on us."

He unbuckled a shoulder harness of a weapon much like the one Angeni held in her hand. He threw it to the ground.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Your companion needs help.”

“You must be the healer. You can help him.”

“Do as I said!” A savage part of her wanted to shout that she was Aldorian first and Prime Healer second.

***We attack, Hippiatra?* The trogon stallion advanced from the lift, his bridle’s left rein torn away. Anticipating her need for his help, he pawed the ground, striking with rapid succession one front leg then the other. Like a dance, but faster. The noise alone frightening.**

The mercenary got a good look at the warhorse and shrank back, losing his confidence. “What the hell is that thing?”

Nethe’s hoof struck close by him, causing him to drop a second weapon he’d pulled from some secret place. He recognized his defeat and held up his hands in surrender.

“Look, we can split our fee with you. Whatever you say? Just let us go.”

“Quiet.”

Nethe tossed his head at her tone.

The dainty Aza stepped forward to help if needed, not looking so petite as she snorted menacingly through her delicate nostrils.

Garek’s deep, masculine voice came from nearby, “What’s going on here, Angel?” He approached from the shadows behind the intruders, speaking in a low, soothing voice.

Her heart leapt. “These men were hired to kill you.” She did not allow her eyes to leave her captives.

“I see. Let me have the weapon back now. I’ll take it from here. Call Nethe down before he kills someone.”

“No. If we trade places, they could try something.”

“Geni.”

She swung the weapon toward the lead mercenary. “You search their clothing. Look for other weapons, small explosives ... I’m fine. I’ll try my best not to kill him.” She attempted a weak, reassuring smile. “I promise you. I won’t allow Nethe to end his worthless life with his hooves either.”

Garek realized she was talking to her enemy. He did as she demanded, but continued talking to her.

“Best warriors in the known universe, male or female, are Aldorian.”

She nodded sharply. “So I’ve heard.”

“My friend, Coyle, carries his warring Aldorian blood well. Creative in a fight. Some say he cheats. No one better to have at your back.”

“I see.”

“You look amazing, Angel.” He looked up at her as he tied the taller man. She was glorious, standing, legs spread in an aggressive stance in front of him. The soft breeze ruffling her blue dress. He’d read accounts of Angeni’s work with injured transgenic children. It would surprise the hell out of him if she’d had the time to become a soldier by training. By nature, but not by training and practice. She had not even known how to handle the weapon until he’d shown her.

It must be natural talent, a dangerous talent. *Whatever she is, she belongs to me now, and I mean to have answers.*

Her eyes cut from the mercenaries to him, her shock clear.

He had not guarded his thoughts. “Now is probably not the time to seek the answers I need, hmmm?” he admitted with a glimmer of humor.

She shook her head.

“Start walking down the passage,” he said to the men. The second merc was coming to consciousness. He bound his hands as well. “Help you partner up. I need a minute of privacy to talk the lady out of killing you,” he continued.

“Guard, Nethe,” he commanded the trogon stallion, as if he were an Alliance security dog. Nethe trotted forward toward the men, apparently just fine with that. Aza pranced along too. When they were out of hearing range he said, “tell them to stop there.”

Far enough Nethe, Angeni ordered telepathically.

Hell, he heard that. Garek rubbed a temple. Should surprise him he could hear her messages to the animals more clearly now. It did not.

The trogon stopped and held the prisoners, their wings stretched out in a show of power.

He turned back to Angeni. He opened his arms. She came toward him in a rush of forward movement, a bundle of shaking relief.

“I wanted them dead, Garek,” she whispered into his shirt, her small, warm hands fisted in the cloth. “Not just tied up,” she went on. “No longer breathing.”

Now she was looking around him toward her prisoners.

“They would have killed you ... for money.”

She shook with the remnants of her rage. He enfolded her closer.

“Shhh, Angel,” he soothed her, rubbing her back. “I believe they would have upped the asking fee if they’d expected to be dealing with a warrior queen and her loyal warhorses,” he said with a laugh.

“Ungrateful pig,” she whispered, but squeezed him tighter.

“I understand too well what you’re going through right now. The after effects of combat can be a powerful force in the blood.” He tried for a comforting tone and failed completely. “Stubborn woman.” He’d heard her use the word for him often enough. Seemed appropriate to the circumstances. *I told you to hide, not to engage the enemy*, he said telepathically.

She lifted her eyes to his, not speaking telepathically or verbally. She did not have to. He read her expression well. She was angry with him.

“Angeni, you could have avoided all this by staying out of sight. Why the hell didn’t you stay put as I told you? Let them walk on by?” They might have killed you.”

***But you would live*, she thought in response. She took a swipe at the tears in her eyes.**

“Angel—” He was awed that she had put his safety first.

“You’re right,” she admitted, grudgingly.

He could see she hated the fact. He pulled the weapon from her white-knuckled fingers. He turned it off and stuck it in a pocket. Then he framed her face with his hands.

She met and held his lips with hers. Angeni traced his mouth with hers in a fierceness that approached desperation.

Angel.

She laid her cheek against his jaw line. “Garek put your arms around me,” she demanded. Then apparently thought better of the demand and softened to a plea, “Please?”

He did as she asked. *You are mine.*

“You just said I am yours,” she whispered against his chest.

“No, Angel, I thought it,” he admitted, smiling. “A man’s primitive thoughts should not be held against him.”

At that moment, an insistent vibration from the earcom sounded. “PRAX to Sahnjun. Are you there, Garek?”

Chapter Twelve

“You’re early.” Garek stated the obvious.

“Didn’t make it all the way home. Had to detour to Triastra Colony,” Coyle said.

“I trust you had a good reason to fly through the worst streams in space?”

“Only way to evade the ship chased us. How is the Chancellor’s daughter?”

“She is fine.”

“Good to hear that,” Coyle answered. “We’ll get you out of there. Scans can’t find you. Where are you?”

“We’re in the underground system, beneath the nature preserve.”

“We’ll bring down a shuttle.”

“The climate domes are hell on a shuttle.”

“You’ll have to come out to meet us then,” Coyle said.

“Hold there. Give us an hour. I want to have a look around Blackford.”

“Not today, my friend. Our scans show the place is crawling with men. We have to get the woman out.”

“Fine. And Coyle, send down a livestock box. Make it large enough for two Aldorian warhorses, wings and all.”

Angeni gave him a smile of pleased relief.

“What did you say?”

“They belong to Angeni. Just do it, Coyle,” Garek said.

“Aldorian warhorses don’t exist.”

“These do.”

“Wings?”

“Yes, wings.”

“Assuming this isn’t a warped joke and they do exist, do we want them up here? The legends say they’re magical, and dangerous.”

“They’re well-trained. Drop the largest floater cargo box you have. They’re a mated pair. They’ll want to ride up together.” Coyle seemed oddly resistant to the idea of the legendary animals.

“Alright, I’ll get a box down there.”

“We also have two human prisoners to transport. Can’t leave them behind. Might have to face them again later if we do.”

“Understood.”

After they’d made their way to the surface, they received a signal that the ship’s shuttle was descending to them. A distant whine became a roar and red landing lights flashed above their heads as the shuttle settled down with a fan of dust and small particles of plant debris.

Nethe and Aza snorted and stepped back, pulling to the end of their reins in, protesting being so close to the frightening machine. The pilot exited and floated the remaining distance on a cargo platform.

“Hello, Garek,” a man’s voice said as he opened the platform’s doors and stepped to the ground. Garek stiffened as he recognized his brother’s voice. He dreaded seeing hatred in Rehne’s eyes. When they faced each other, he saw only concern.

“Brother?”

“Good to see you’re safe.” His brother slapped him on the back with genuine enthusiasm.

Garek relaxed his stance, relieved his brother's attitude toward him had changed for the better since the last time they'd met.

"Angeni, I'd like you to meet my brother, Rehne."

"I'm pleased to meet you." She offered her hand politely.

"Ma'am." Rehne took her hand.

"The family resemblance is clear," she said, smiling.

"How did you get involved in this mission?" Garek asked.

"I was on Triastra Colony when Coyle asked permission to land the PRAX." He continued, "Increasing the female population with healers is a dream come true for our grandmother. The Alliance's Cultural Exchange may be high-jacked by Clothoes."

"I can guess it is."

"She's treating them like royalty," Rehne said with a smile.

*** * * ***

Within minutes, Rehne had flown them up and away and slipped the cargo shuttle in the ship's largest bay. Angeni took time to assure herself of the safety of the warhorses in the cargo bay's animal life support cubicles. They were curious, but unworried, demanding food.

When she felt confident Rehne and the cargo crew could care for them, she and Garek walked toward the ship's cockpit.

As they neared the front of the ship, she touched her temples. Her head ached from some sort of telepathic interference, like static on a com-link. She'd heard nothing from the Trogon since they boarded.

The closest she'd ever encountered was with animals new to her. This feedback felt like herds of them all sending at once. A herd of Vendor elephants had once been similar. Her head buzzed in painful resonance. Garek shielded from her, but some of his thoughts leaked to her, cool and soothing in their sympathetic vibrations, compared to

the new sounds.

“What’s wrong, Angeni?”

She flashed her gaze to his. “I wish I knew,” she answered, taking a firmer grip on her throbbing temples.

“Tell me. You are hurting?”

“I’m fine. Fine—just strange telepathic feedback. Something...”

Garek grabbed her by the elbow, halting her forward motion. She rounded on him, waiting, watching. “She tried for a normal façade, striving to ignore her aching senses. Tears of physical pain gathered behind her eyes.

Angeni? What is it? **“What’s wrong? You’re pain scares me.”**

Open your thoughts to me. Please. I need it. It’s soothing. **She hated asking this of him.**

He immediately released the mental barriers he’d likely worked hard to build. The blessed relief was like breathing again. The painful echoes subsided to a dull ache.

Better? **He pulled her into his arms.**

She nodded. *Telepathic feedback.*

I feel it now. It’s sharp, angry. Something in the ship? Someone?

Don’t know.

The fusion strips lose a lot of heat energy.

He started them moving again. As they made their way through the narrow corridors, she looked at the slingship, watching for anything that could cause telepathic noise. She knew a spacecraft such as this one was designed with two identical cockpits. To eliminate turning in the slipstream. But she had not expected the military equipment she saw on the PRAX. She’d expected civilian fittings. Instead, it had surveillance microelectronics along the walls, reinforced compartment doors and gunner turret cubicles.

“Is this a warship? Alliance-owned?” she asked.

“No. Mine,” Garek answered. “The red, white and black paint everywhere gives the impression of Alliance ownership. A little inside joke from Coyle.”

“What do you do with it? I mean in normal circumstances?”

He paused again along their path. “Cargo transport. Haven’t had it long. The ship was incentive for me to take on this escort project. To overcome my natural reluctance, you might say.” Garek laughed without much genuine humor.

“You made them pay you to help us?”

He looked at her. “Hell. It sounds bad, doesn’t it? I was a bit hesitant to become involved at first. That’s all. Before I knew your safety was at risk.”

She gestured to the laser cubicles. “You expect a gun battle?”

“Some upgrades, like the fire-proof armoring, are a surprise even to me, too. This mission is important to the Alliance. Latest shields. New tech, even for a military ship, much less a cargo PRAX vessel. We had to leave off a Zoni gun to lighten the load a bit. The turret you just saw is empty, but we have others fully functional.” He motioned to the one nearest their position.

Suddenly the telepathic feedback she’d been fighting melded into words.

***By the gods, it’s good to have them aboard.* At the harsh message, Angeni stumbled. Garek caught her.**

“What the hell?” he asked. *Angeni?*

She stopped still. Her head ached again. A male. Not Garek. The words from the other seemed to float, tense and biting in her mind. She slammed her hands to her temples, seeking support. Garek turned to look at her, worried.

***Tell me.* He demanded. He offered a steady hand.**

“Bad headache. Words this time. Rage. Pain.”

“Telepathy? My words?”

“No, no, not your words. Not soothing words like yours. Troubled, steeped in old anger. Pain. Human. A very intense human.”

“Hell, hell, hell.”

She breathed hard and fast for a few seconds, and then the throbbing began to recede. The telepathic message was a different pathway than with Garek. A weapon. More than that, the words, the language of the words was—*Oh, heavens, it’s Aldorian*. She had not spoken Aldorian with anyone but her mother, and that was years ago as a young child.

“Aldorian?” Garek whispered, closing his hand tighter on her arm. “Let’s get to the helm.” He rushed her along the rest of the way.

The doors to the pilot’s cabin, with the unity symbols of the Alliance, slid open. The cockpit was shaped like a triangle. The pilot and co-pilot’s seats at the narrowest point, and two navigator’s chairs at the far corner of the base. The door took up the other corner.

Angeni saw a strikingly handsome man in front of the control computer. He looked to be in his early thirties. His long blonde hair was drawn sleekly back and held with a narrow leather strap, the remainders of the braided strapping following the hair. The stranger stood and turned at their entry. He made her think of legendary warriors striding through villages of the dark past.

The stranger stared at her with puzzled brown eyes. On the far side of him was a very tall, painfully thin man, equally imposing in his own way. He barely looked up, engrossed in monitoring the complex circuitry in front of him. A full view of him was obscured from her by the hardware of wall reinforcements near the far navigation console.

Garek moved to a position of protection, half in front of her. “Healer Traek, I would like you to meet the Chancellor of District Fourteen, the Clothoes District, Coyle Oside. And the Chancellor’s Chief Guard, Hane.”

Sister.

She put her hands to her ears like a child. The one Aldorian word danced along her

mind, painful and sad.

“What the hell?” Garek asked.

Angeni gasped and bent double.

“Dammit, Coyle, if you’re sending her telepathic messages, dial it back. It’s hurting her!” He covered her with his bulk as though to physically stop her pain.

“What the hell do you mean?”

“Soften your thoughts, dammit. Think of the Blemian Sea, fishing, some scene of peace.”

“Translate your thoughts to the language of the Alliance. Not Aldorian. Please,” Angeni requested.

“You are telling me you hear my thoughts. In Aldorian?”

“Yes,” she said.

Hane looked up at that, his silver eyes curious.

“There is truth in the telepathy legends?” Coyle asked. “When you were little, I thought I heard some of your thoughts. Heard ... or felt ... whatever the hell it was. You were too small to remember. It was my duty to protect you.”

“Sister?” Angeni questioned, dazed.

“Angeni, I may call you Angeni?” Coyle asked.

“Yes, fine.” She waved an impatient hand for him to go on. At the moment, she was too disturbed for the civilities of name etiquette. “Who are you?” she demanded. “I don’t mean your name. How can you claim to be my brother?”

“I did not mean for you to learn of our kinship so abruptly. I did not plan to tell you at all. I wanted only to protect you. *But I cause you pain.*” His brown eyes looked deeply troubled.

“Shield your thoughts,” Garek said again. “Think of physical barriers.”

Coyle rubbed his temples, closed his eyes, and then nodded. “Those stories about Aldorians having the ability to read their warhorses’ thoughts?”

“True. Apparently,” Garek said.

“The legends claim it’s rare to receive messages from another human.” He ran a hand through his hair. “A mate. A blood relative. Supposed to be simple legends, stories for the children.”

She felt he spoke for his own benefit.

***Who are you to me?* She dared a mental connection.**

Coyle grimaced. *Your mother’s older child.* “I’m your half-brother,” he answered aloud.

“Oh, heavens,” she breathed, instinctively reaching for Garek. Her fingers clinched around the cloth of his sleeve.

He moved closer to her, offering his support.

Hear him out. He does not lie. Not normally anyway.

She nodded, grateful for his reassurance.

Coyle looked puzzled. “Sahnjun how do you know so much about shielding telepathic messages?”

“Long story. What is going on here, Coyle?” Garek demanded. “Do you know how Angeni came to be posing as an Olandian?” Garek’s stance was rigid, prepared for the worst.

“I am Olandian. I’m not posing.”

“She is Olandian,” Coyle echoed. “Half Olandian anyway. She was raised and educated Olandian. If she wants to tell you more than that, it’s for her to decide.”

Coyle’s eyes focused on his friend, half-pleading, half-demanding Garek not push the

issue. “Your part in this mission has not changed,” he snapped.

“Like blazing hell from the skies, it hasn’t.”

Point taken, Coyle answered along Angeni’s mental pathway.

Chapter Thirteen

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“Dammit, don’t do that!” Garek shouted.

“Just a little test. I’m assuming you heard.”

“Stop testing me.”

Angeni watched the byplay. “Do you mean you heard him too?”

“Yes, unfortunately I did,” Garek admitted. “I don’t like it. Tell me how this son of a Listor Frog came to be your brother?”

“I’m not sure.”

She owed him an explanation. She gathered her strength.

“My father ... my father and mother met off Olandia planet.” She paused, then began again. “They met at an outpost, an Olandian med ship like the Sanctuary. She was working in a position much like Sidra’s.

Garek nodded his understanding.

“They developed an agreeable relationship and married.” Angeni drew in a breath. The words of a secret long guarded stuck in her throat.

“My mother was Aldorian,” she blurted, lifting her chin.

“I’m not surprised.”

“As a fair-skinned blonde with hazel eyes and ... she hid as an Olandian. Her first husband, a vicious Aldorian warrior searched for her relentlessly. He was said to be fierce and ruthless even by Aldorian standards.”

“Chahl Oside,” Coyle offered. “My father.”

Angeni glanced at Coyle. He learned fast to moderate his thoughts. Deep feelings were there, all mixed and roiling through his mind, but the sharp edges were gone now.

“Yes?” Garek encouraged her to continue.

She went on, “My mother told me these things. But I had no idea there was another child.” She shook her head. “No wonder Mother’s eyes were so sad.”

“Secrets,” Garek said.

Coyle gave a slight nod of acknowledgement. “I missed you. And her. I understood her motives, but it hurt.” He swiped a hand across his face.

“You knew me.”

“I watched over you.”

“So, Saxton Traek knows he is not my father?”

“He must. Yes.”

“Go on, Angel,” Garek prompted again.

***They stole a brother from me, this holovid drama family of mine.* The thought echoed from her heart.**

I know, love, Garek answered.

Coyle heard.

She read it in his eyes, a flash of awareness.

He smiled a sad smile.

This was different, strange, this communication with her sibling.

“She cared for my father, I’m sure she did, but Saxton Traek’s primary role was to provide a cover for her, a shield.” She organized her words and seek some way to soften her mother’s actions. After her encounter with the mercenaries, she understood all too well protecting someone you loved.

Her heart lurched. She did love Garek, despite the frequent exasperation he caused her. Despite telling herself she was over him all the past year.

“Mother never expected Saxton Traek to become a Chancellor and be under such close public scrutiny. The strain of hiding her true identity took a toll. She kept to herself as much as possible. She had few close friends. She could not afford the risk. Father says she worried about her first husband’s spies. I know she worried for his career as well. The official explanation for her reclusive behavior was ill health.”

“Was she discovered?” Garek asked.

“No.”

“Are you sure?” Coyle asked.

She shook her head. “Not that we knew.”

“If her identity had become known, the scandal would have been damaging for Chancellor Traek,” Coyle added helpfully.

“Yes.” She smiled her gratitude. “To complicate matters, she had more melanin in her skin than Olandians, so she could not spend much time outside. Olandia was a prison for my mother. Piloting her shuttle was her only escape.”

“So, that explains why you’re so comfortable in the darkness of the escape tunnel at the Chancellor’s palace and the underground in the Preserve.” Garek exhaled the words. “You have to avoid the sun as your mother did.”

Her eyes flashed to Garek’s. “Yes, even more so,” she admitted.

The tall man, Hane, stepped from the shadow and spoke, his voice deep and rumbling, “Coyle, security cameras show a man approaches. Through the outer corridor in this direction.”

The voice was amazing. Too much sound and tone for such a thin man. He defined unobtrusive, as quiet and watchful as a cat.

Angeni caught a brief glimpse of his face as he stepped closer to them. She saw the armored skin covering the beautifully sculpted masculine cheekbones.

“Oh, what have they done to you?” she asked. Without thought, Angeni crossed the short distance, and her hand touched his shoulder, turning him toward her. The stiffened posture of a man already too rigid told her of her mistake. He faced her, looking down with the starkest eyes she’d ever seen.

The man hated pity. Dreaded it worse than pain. She should have known. She always managed to control her reactions to transgenics, but her emotions were so close to the surface today, too close. This was the most thorough, the most successful transgen she’d ever seen. Astonishing. His skin was more reptile, or fish than human.

His makers would be looking for him. His position as a chancellor’s guard offered some protection.

“I thought you would be used to my kind, Prime Healer?”

“I’m so sorry. I ask you to forgive my bluntness, Officer...?”

“I’m sorry to say, I have no last name to exchange in introductions. Awkward. Petri dishes don’t pass on a surname, I’m afraid.” He paused, his silver eyes glinting with shards of fire and ice.

“Nonsense, you have genetic parents somewhere.”

***Angeni*, Garek warned telepathically.**

Hane edged aside to escape the touch of her hand. “I’ve read of your therapeutic work with genetically damaged children.” Some of the bitterness that marred his voice had faded now.

“Yes.”

“I salute you. Normals do not want us around, much less to teach our kind. You share your brother’s sense of humanity.” He gave her a curt saluting nod, then busied his hands with work.

“I am honored to do it,” she said. “I’m rewarded for my work with the children’s smiles and laughter.”

At that moment, the doorway slid open. Her nemesis, an angry and purposeful Froton Warrick stepped into the tight cockpit.

Hane moved forward to meet him. “You were told to stay in your quarters until we reached our destination.”

“I am here in my capacity as an Olandian Council of Healers emissary. This ship has not left port yet. No harm will come to me at this stage,” Warrick declared. “My concern for Angeni’s safety brings me here.”

Angeni sighed. “How did you come to be aboard this ship?”

“I was at the hotel where the women gathered, of course.” He looked as if he resented answering. “Watching out for them.”

“Of course.” Angeni’s tone was laced with sarcasm.

“Naturally, I offered my services to oversee their voyage. Violent nausea is not uncommon on these rapid travels. Humans are not meant to travel so fast.” Warrick’s smile was condescending.

“Nonsense,” Coyle said.

“Does Chancellor Traek know of your thoughtful intervention, Warrick?” Garek demanded, advancing toward Warrick with menacing strides. The smaller man

stepped back, intimidated.

Garek continued, “We have no need of your services. I remember you from Dandrovia. You allowed Angeni to carry most of your work responsibilities.”

Warrick jutted his chin. “Saxton Traek would have no objection to his daughter being accompanied by her future husband,” Warrick said.

“Husband!” Angeni exclaimed.

“Why you ambitious bastard,” Garek growled through clenched teeth as he lifted Warrick off the ground by the loose collars of his robes.

Angeni noticed Coyle and his Security Chief shared a look of surprised amusement at the uneven match the two made.

“Primitive barbarian,” Warrick spat at him.

“Listen, Warrick, the last thing she needs is another prospect for her husband. She is bound to me as husband for now.”

The man looked to Angeni. “What is he talking about? Has this mutated savage touched you?” Warrick looked down toward his feet as though only just noticing the precarious nature of his suspended position. His expression reflected the realization that name-calling was not a prudent strategy at the moment.

Garek! Release him.

I am not your warhorses to be commanded, he growled telepathically.

Of course not. Please.

He released him. Warrick stumbled backward into Hane.

“Garek is my husband. By Clothoes law.” Garek turned his head parallel to his shoulder to stare at her. He seemed as surprised as anyone that she was going along with his statement. She would never hold him to the insane law.

“Husband?” Coyle asked.

She went on, “You have a wife, Warrick. You must see polygamous marriages are a luxury Olandia can not afford as a people.” She tried for a diplomatic tone.

Warrick snorted rudely. “Bah. As I’ve said before, Olandia is in no immediate jeopardy.”

Hane spoke, “Councilman Warrick, we are finishing our sling laps and ready to fly hyperspeed. Life support is limited to four humans in the pilot area. Extra personnel could jeopardize all our lives. I will escort you to your quarters and seal your travel locks.”

Hane’s cord-thin fingers wrapped around the smaller man’s elbow and walked a sputtering Warrick to the doorway.

Warrick didn’t try to hide his distaste. “Take your hand from me, mutant.”

With steel-control, Hane ignored the man’s insult.

Angeni noticed Coyle had sagged against the console, his head now propped on his arm, elbow on the console. The telepathic messages were now a blur of fatigue.

“Garek, can you pilot this craft?” Angeni asked.

“I can.”

“I think you should relieve ... my ... ah, my brother. He’s past exhaustion.”

“She’s right Garek. Take over. It’s a tough route to fly.”

“I should have suggested it myself,” Garek said, then turned his attention back to Angeni. “The streams have a tendency to loop out and go chaotic like turbulent water. A pilot must be alert every second. It’s mentally draining.”

“We had some flux damage to the propulsion strips. Rehne reworked them before we started the return trip,” Coyle said. “Watch out for Triastra’s space parasols. Tend to shift around to maximize the protection of the planet surface from her suns.”

“Got it. You up to watching the space state? Angeni can help you. Her reflexes are fast, she should be good at it.”

“I’m pretty wrung out. No sleep lately.” Coyle rubbed long fingers along the bridge of his nose. “But I can watch for chaotic loops, no problem.”

“Show me what to look for,” Angeni said.

“Little Sis and I can get reacquainted,” Coyle said.

“Right. The two of you need to talk. Tell her all you know of her family.”

“I’d like that,” Angeni said.

“And she can tell me how you came to be in the line of men wanting to be her husband.” He slapped Garek on the shoulder. “The Clothoes chaperone law!”

“Right.”

Under her feet, Angeni felt the timbre of the engines change, and increase in vibe frequency. She looked down toward the source of the sound.

“The ship just reached full power. Time for launch,” Garek said.

Hane slipped back in the doors just in time.

Chapter Fourteen

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“Take the co-pilot seat, Hane,” Garek ordered.

Hane nodded and moved to the seat next to Garek.

“The nonverbal communication is strange, isn’t it?” Coyle whispered to Angeni. Across the room, Garek and Hane concentrated on their consoles, absorbed in the flight details. The space state monitors in front of her and Coyle were quiet and normal.

“Yes,” she agreed.

“Must have been quite an advantage for our aggressive ancestors. No wonder they’ve succeeded in conquering so many worlds,” he said.

“You should rest,” she told him.”

“This is resting compared to flying the PRAX through a chaotic loop.” He leaned back into the high back of his seat. “We have a lot of years to catch up on. You want to ask me a question.”

“Yes. Tell me why our mother ran from your father?” Angeni needed to know the answer.

He shrugged. “Some people build. Others destroy. My father has built a fortune thriving on wars, coups and tribal rivalries. Always careful not to get his hands too soiled.” He grimaced. “He thinks if he doesn’t take advantage of situations someone else will.”

Coyle paused for a moment, looking about the room as if for answers.

“Chahl Oside is a handsome man and charming,” he said.

“His name is Chahl?” He’d pronounced it Kall.

“Your names—”

He nodded. “Are nearly the same. Mine is the Clothoes pronunciation. The only difference.”

“Tell me about them.” She clinched her hands on the chair arms.

“She was young when he found her. From two different warring clans. I suspect she was abducted.”

She brought her hand to her mouth in horror. “Oh, no!”

Angeni?

I’m fine, Garek.

You’re thoughts are troubled.

I’m sorry, I will block them.

No. It’s fine. No need to shield from me.

Alright. Thank you.

Beside her, Coyle closed his eyes in thought. “The life our mother lived is shocking, but it’s the way on Aldoria. Chahl recently lost his status as an Alpha warlord, but still wields a great deal of tainted power and influence even as an aging man.”

“You see him?”

“At times. He speaks to the Alliance and the outside world only through me. He calls me, The Offspring.” There was no humor in his eyes now, she noticed.

“As though I were a disease. Or a wart on the end of his nose.” *He tries to use me to carry out his schemes.*

Angeni gasped at the force of anger permeating the words, the turmoil of his thoughts was nearing painful again. She worked hard not to let him see her pain.

He laughed cynically. “Had you not wondered why I’m an Alliance Chancellor at so early an age, Sister? It’s my reputed ability to buffer my father’s power.” He paused.

“Surely you are modest.”

“Some say control him but, believe me, it is not so. I could never control him. Not if he’s still alive. I hold him off at best.”

“What kind of father was he to you? Do you remember?” Angeni asked the question with fatalistic curiosity. She wasn’t sure she wanted to hear what he might say, this

brother she had not known a few hours ago, but already loved with her every instinct for family. He was a good man.

“Thank the gods, he was gone a lot when we were there, but I remember him as fun to be around,” he answered in stark tones.

“Of course. You were his child.”

“Our mother arranged for me to grow up on Clothoes. She guessed Chahl would never look in the camp of his strongest enemies for his son. Perhaps I would be like him—or at least more easily deceived by him—if I had lived in the same home.”

She shook her head. “No, no, you would not have been like him. I sense goodness in you. I think a person like that has to be born with a strong streak of darkness.” But he might have destroyed your soul, she thought with heartfelt insight.

He nodded, then smiled. “Thank you, little sister. I’m reassured. I would hate becoming like him.”

“You’re welcome.” She smiled.

“Please don’t think unkindly of our mother,” he said. “Chahl was rabid to find her, searching for her all these years has done much to defuse my father’s focus. Maybe she knew that would be the case. I prefer to think it. As I like to think that was the reason she left me behind and never attempted contact. Chahl has not yet given up the search for her. Not even when he received the disc record of her death ten years ago.”

She sat straighter. “He received a holovid disc record of her death?”

“Yes, she must have arranged in advance for it to be sent. How else would he have received it? It said only that she died in a flying accident. Where she had been all those years was not mentioned.”

He’d answered enough about Chahl. She changed the direction of their talk, “Tell me about Clothoes and your years there with Garek’s family.

“They were happy years.”

“I’m glad.” She was relieved. She knew it was not always so with displaced children. They could be tormented by the loss of their parents.

“I went through a resentful stage. But Clothoes is a great place for a child.”

“I imagine it would be. I’ve read it has magnificent eroded mountain ranges, oceans as clean and blue as the sky.” Her voice showed her awe.

“Yes. I suppose I take it for granted.”

“Tell me about Clothoes history?”

He grinned. “Most of the early colonists were male. Women were scarce. There are legends it was an artificial shortage.” He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Artificial?”

“According to the old stories, the indigenous women were eliminated by the Aldorian female settlers.”

“They killed them?”

“I have shocked you.”

Angeni? What disturbs you? The message came from Garek.

It’s nothing, I’m fine, she reassured him.

Coyle tells you troubling stories of my people?

I asked. Concentrate on your work. Don’t worry about me.

“Yes, I’m a bit shocked, Coyle, but go on.”

“Whatever the truth, the shortage of women has led to a culture of great reverence for women.

“It evolved into a matriarchal society.”

“We will change the subject. Garek is giving me a strange look. He senses your unease at the savagery of Aldor. You will enjoy Garek’s station. It has lands set aside for

exotic species.”

“Wonderful, I look forward to seeing them.”

“Your warhorses will make a great addition.”

“You love Clothoes?” she said.

“Yes. On Clothoes, children form strong groups by age. Not criminal gangs or anything like that.”

“You are ‘age brothers’, Garek called it,” she prompted, watchful.

After a moment’s pause, he continued. “Right, groups of a few kids. Tribal tradition. It used to be necessary to survival. Young males leave home early. To learn.”

“Tell me more of your friendship with Garek.”

“Garek took responsibility for me in the same ways any sibling might a younger child, even though we were nearly the same age.”

“I can see it now.” She laughed. The image of this grown man as a trouble-making younger version came to her easily. She could also imagine an exasperated young Garek trying to keep him out of trouble.

“Garek let me take much of my frustration and anger out on him. He never really fought back. Well, almost never. It was a minor miracle he did not throw me out of the family. The other children at school were afraid of me.” He laughed hollowly. “I was different; an outcast in many ways, but Garek was always my friend.”

She sighed. “Good. I’m glad.”

“Do you know Garek was the first male from Clothoes to leave the planet for space?” She noticed a touch of pride for his friend in his voice.

She supported her cheek with a hand, watching him. “No. I did not know.”

“Clothoes men aren’t expected to serve the mandatory enlistment in Alliance Security Service. But Garek left Clothoes with me when I volunteered.”

“Yes, of course he would. He went to watch out for you.”

“Interesting,” he said, laughing. “You’re right, of course. I’ve never thought it through. Always the responsible big brother, hmmm?”

“Yes. That would be my diagnosis.”

He rubbed a hand over his eyes. “His grandmother has not forgiven him for joining The Alliance Guard. Then the episode with the arranged fiancée only reinforced old hurts—”

“The fiancée who became his brother’s wife?”

“Yes. I’m surprised he told you.”

“I don’t believe he told me the whole story. You should rest now.”

“I should. The computer will let you know of anything to worry about.” He grinned. Just let Garek know through your telepathy.

“I will.”

With that her brother closed his eyes to sleep. “May be needed in the pilot’s seat later,” he mumbled.

Two hours later, an alarm sounded on the space state monitor on front of her.

***Garek*, she warned.**

I see the loop.

Coyle sat up. “We’re jumping through the unpredictable part of the stream now. Garek was right, you’re a natural at nav.”

“Reassuring.”

***Hippiatra, another metal bird follows us.* The mental communication from Nethe interrupted.**

Garek!

I heard. Another ship. Right behind us. Too close.

Chapter Fifteen

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Garek and Hane worked at stabilizing of the slingship's forward course when Nethe and Angeni's warning came. Garek saw no ship on the screen, but he asked the engines for more speed just in case.

A few seconds later, Hane said, "There it is. Another PRAX, closing fast. Too fast." His statement echoed harsh and urgent in the small cabin.

Garek saw the image on his monitor at the same second. There was room for one ship at a time in a slipstream. Traffic was tightly controlled for that reason. The other ship approached at extreme speed, rolling and tossing, nearing an out-of-control state. They felt turbulence as the other ship bounced back and forth off the boundaries of the stream. Coyle strode over to hover behind him.

Thank the heavens for the early warning. He'd wager Nethe and Aza had sensed something. Good thing she brought them along after all.

"If the other crew doesn't get that godforsaken ship under control before the stream narrows to a string pathway, they'll destroy us as well," Hane said.

There's another loop ahead, Angeni said. Soon. Not much time.

"She's right," Coyle said. "Can you pilot at more speed?"

Garek pushed the engines for more. So much more, he felt a hint of the heat from the fusion beneath his feet. All his concentration was riveted to holding their PRAX steady and balanced, center on, in the stream. His injured shoulder stretched and tore in protest at the rapid movements of his hands over the con. Suddenly he felt Angeni fill his mind with psychic energy, boosting his thought process and relieving his pain all at once.

“The other ship’s creating chaos to close ground. Rather than relying on engines,” Garek said.

Coyle swore a savage curse in Aldorian. “Fools. They won’t last.”

“No they won’t. We have to keep them from taking us with them,” Garek said.

“Frozen hell,” said Hane. His arms also strained and flexed from holding the speeding ship on course.

“They’re getting into position to try to leap-frog over us!” Garek shouted.

“Knocking us out into still space. To save themselves,” Hane agreed.

“We will not allow it,” Garek said.

The ship’s engines screamed in protest. Angeni felt an ominous shudder along the hulls, a grating groan followed. Small items fell to the floor around them, as they seemed to lurch forward at double speed. Coyle was tense, standing behind the other two men.

She watched the space state monitor, not that they could decelerate for a loop now.

She was a pilot herself. Not as skilled as her mother had been, but good enough to know not to panic in the air.

The ship gave another aching moan before speeding forward at an even faster rate.

Coyle’s eyes flashed fierce and angry now. All pretence of normalcy gone from his expression, he looked back to her. “I sincerely hope we do not get you killed on your first hyperspeed flight, little sister.”

Again the ship flexed from a shock it received from a chaotic loop. Angeni caught a

glass globe map of Clothoes before it fell. “Garek will get us through it,” she said with confidence.

For fourteen long minutes the struggle continued.

The other bird has fallen, came from Nethe.

Our enemies are gone, Aza whispered solemnly.

“Your horses says the other ship is lost?” Coyle asked.

“You hear the trogon?”

“Hell yes, apparently I can.”

Angeni felt the backward surge of the ship as it slowed its speed.

“We’ve safely resumed gliding speed,” Garek announced.

She left her chair and went to his side.

“You’re bleeding.”

“Damn,” Garek looked to the blood trickling from his reopened wound onto the computer visuals. “A good way to screw up expensive technology.”

“Let me see your wound has reopened,” Angeni cried. “You must have been moving it non-stop. Coyle, take over while I tend to his arm.”

She located the first-aid supplies and led Garek to her nav seat.

Exhausted and uncharacteristically compliant, he went with her without a word of protest.

Coyle took the pilot’s chair and began the delicate maneuvering around the first layer of Triastra’s parasol complex.

“Oww,” Garek complained as Angeni worked on his wound.

“The other ship in the stream behind us—,” she began.

Garek took a breath as she used a cauterizing cream.

“—had guns.”

“Yes, I read the discharges on the space state,” Angeni said. “Who were they?”

“Same ship that dogged Coyle in the launch port back yesterday would be my guess. Pilot panicked.”

“Survivors?”

“I scanned for ejected life-support cubes. None.”

*** * * ***

“So, Lucius, you have come to me yourself this time,” Chahl Oside stated.

“You requested it.” Lendow supposed he should feel fear. But he had felt nothing at all for a long time now.

“My spies tell me you have more bad news for me.”

“A few mistakes have been made,” Lendow answered blankly.

“Mistakes? By the gods of Aldor, you lost a PRAX ship this time! Small crafts by space travel standards, but costly. Harder to lose than a handful of mercenaries, a ground shuttle and a small woman, I’d say.”

“Uh, yes sir, I suppose so.” Lendow stared at his employer.

Oside’s voice went lower, colder. “Kalon was aboard. One of my best men.” Regret crossed his face. “With me in the beginning. Damn few of them left. I did not build the kind of capitol resources I have by losing.”

Lendow thought better of speaking. He alone knew he was not in this for money only.

“Tell me what happened to the ship?”

“They followed Coyle Aside through the stream to Triastra. Flew apart on a chaotic loop.”

“Why go to that hot, purple wasteland?”

“Don’t know. Warrick couldn’t tell us, just gave us his location. He has aroused their suspicion and is having more difficulty getting communications to us.”

“There is nothing on Triastra Colony.”

“Could be they knew our people followed and sought refuge.”

“And your idiots followed them in. What did the fools plan to do in chaotic space?”

“The pilot was somewhat inexperienced. Hard to lure them away from commercial transport or mail platoon pay for this kind of, er ... riskier ... endeavor. They know the stakes are high. If caught, the Alliance will restrain their liberty.”

“Inexperienced. More like incompetent. Kalon should not have stepped aboard.”

“You paid him well. His mad daughter, Sidra, will be a wealthy woman now.”

“Enough! She is now the leader of his clan and his warriors and is owed your respect.”

“Of course, sir.” Lendow barely refrained from saying he was Olandian and owed no Aldorian his respect.

“We shall arrange it so our quarry comes to us,” Aside said. He opened the top drawer of his desk and took out a flatvid news photo. “What does the woman care about? That is the question we must ask.”

Lendow came closer to the desk. The image he showed a young woman smiling at a child. A genetically injured child astride a colorful riderbeast.

“Find another team of mercenaries. A more advanced caliber this time, if you will. And hire a better PRAX pilot. Up the offer. Pay what you must.”

“Yes, sir.”

Chapter Sixteen

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Angeni's male guardians, Hane, Coyle, Garek and his brother, Rehne, formed four-sided human walls around her as they walked from the launch port into a bright, thickly glazed bridgeway and walked toward a nearby cluster of buildings. So much shorter, she could barely see out. Hane alternated walking forward, then backward, scanning the surroundings with sharp eyes, and an evil-looking weapon at the ready.

Angeni smiled at his expression, so serious. The men took their duties as her bodyguards far too seriously. Garek walked between her and the most direct rays of Triastra's suns. He raised an eyebrow at her smile.

"What amuses you, Healer?" he asked.

"That you four treat me as a porcelain princess."

"You are female. An honorable man protects a woman."

"I see. Too helpless to protect herself, is she?" She grinned.

"On the contrary. Still."

"This port seems out-of-date, old-style transport technology?" she asked.

"It is. Barely workable for the PRAX ship. Traffic is thin in this solar system. Supply and mail ships are about the extent of the visitors."

Angeni lifted a hand to shade her eyes. The intense glare of the Colony's suns defied their space parasols. And the protective glasses they all wore. The cloudy white glazing

of the sheltered walkway also offered protection. In spite of all that and Garek's standing over her like a small tree, her tender skin, unused to sunlight, heated and prickled. Even through her clothing. She rubbed her shoulders to relieve the burn.

Garek noticed her discomfort. He stopped and took a garment from his pack and spread it over her shoulders. The cool material was heaven to her hot skin.

"Less than three percent of the heat from each of the two most distant suns reaches Triastra," he said. "But added to the rays of the strong mother star, it's too much. The nights are just as extreme in their cold temperatures."

"A desert. Why do we colonize every remote space rock no matter how unsuitable?" she asked. Her whole body responded to the temperature, perspiration trickled down her neck and along her spine.

"Ownership," Garek answered without hesitation.

Rehne offered, "No. It's the search itself. The gamble of it. The hunt."

"Thought you trained in engineering, not economics, Brother?"

The younger man laughed. "I'm broadly schooled," he said.

"You're both dead wrong," Coyle chimed in, waving an expansive hand outward. "We travel because we're compelled to. To seek education is our nature. We expand through the universe to expand the minds of our children."

"Very philosophical and pretty," Garek argued, "But you're both talking about ownership. Mapping new worlds amounts to widening the territory."

Angeni looked from one to the other, smiling happily at the good-natured argument. The men were magnificent. All of them. Similar in height and bearing. She had to stretch to match her strides to theirs, and she knew they were shortening theirs to help her keep up.

She noticed Hane's gaze shifted from one man to another. So far, he'd watched and listened, remaining silent.

"Knowledge is the ultimate possession." He contributed at last, startling her, his voice deep and rumbling. "No one can steal it away."

“Another philosopher among us,” she said.

“Of course you would agree with Oside.” Garek looked to Hane. “Ownership is the only reason people live at ninety degrees north latitude on one of the hottest, semi-survivable planets known to mankind.”

“You think your Jona lives here because she owns it?” Angeni asked, still grinning, challenging him with her eyes. She might be seeing another kind of ownership in his look, a male-female kind.

“Yes. Why else? Nothing to look at but kilometers of red-leaved plants scorched into submission?”

“There’s also the matter of the time warp legend,” Coyle offered. “If true, it provides her a few more years to wait for you wastrel grandsons to produce a great-granddaughter.”

Rehne looked away, troubled.

“It’s only a legend. But still ownership of a type,” Garek repeated, his eyes sharp.

“Garek, you’re a huge cynic,” Angeni said, laughter bubbling up.

“A realist,” he countered.

As they closed upon the settlement, beautiful, glowing architectural structures came into clear view.

Angeni stopped walking. “What is the white stone on the buildings?” she asked.

“Shells. Crushed shells from the planet’s sea-life. Mined from the beaches,” Garek answered.

“Coyle said there are fish here.”

“Ultraviolet rays are absorbed by the water. Plant life is plentiful, but it’s all class two vegetation, not good for building material. The cost of freighting building materials in is prohibitive.”

A tall slender woman stepped from the most prominent and impressive of the castle-like buildings. “Rehne, you have returned,” she spoke, addressing Garek’s younger brother. “I have been watching for your approach. They tell me you bring another of the healers from Olandia?” The woman’s aged, but piercing blue eyes focused on Angeni.

Garek answered in spite of the question being asked of his younger brother, “Yes, this is Healer Angeni Traek, a healer of Prime level. She is also the daughter of Olandia’s Chancellor, Saxton Traek.”

Angeni nodded a greeting cautiously, unsure of Clothoes customs, trying to remember the lessons on human cultures from her early school years.

“Angeni, this is our grandmother, Alda Sahnjun, the Jona of the Archon clan of Mervist Village, Clothoes,” he said.

“I am pleased to meet you, Jona of Archon.” She offered a hand, palm up.

The Jona nodded, her look approving. The older woman seemed pleased she knew the correct greeting. The Jona placed her palm over hers for a moment.

“You will escort Angeni to her quarters with the other women.” Again the older woman addressed her comments to Rehne, her eyes directed at her youngest grandson, shunning Garek. “I’m sure she needs to rest and time to recover from the stress of hyperspeed travel. And the walk in our suns today.”

“I will stay with Garek. I trust him to see to my safety,” Angeni said simply. A respectful awareness came over the Jona’s face. She saw a dawning of respect that she had stood up for Garek. Good.

“I see. Very well then.”

Garek observed the interaction of the two women. Angeni amazed him by the moment. She’d held a grudge against the mercenaries for wanting him dead. He could not deny liking the idea she cared that he lived. And now she defended him with the Jona. He smiled.

“Angeni will not be staying with the others,” he said. “By Clothoes matrimonial law, she is to be my wife. If she will have me.” His eyes sought Angeni’s. “She will stay in

the room next to mine.”

After a moment of shocked silence, his grandmother said, “Well, you’ve joined the fallible mortals, eh, Grandson?” A fierce anger burned in her eyes. Then it was replaced by a look of hope, the second expression just as quickly masked as the first.

“Your woman is strong-willed and passionate, Garek. She dares me to shun you for past failures.” She drew herself up tall and proud. “She will help you in the Challenge.”

“The Challenge?” Angeni asked.

“The matrimonial ceremony of my people,” Garek answered.

The Jona added, “The Challenge is a time of learning to trust for a new couple. They return for three days to the primitive ways of our people.” Her eyes speared Garek.

“How primitive?” Angeni asked.

“The man must prove he is capable of protecting his wife and any future offspring, of course. Just as his ancestors did. Without the aid of civilized tools. If he fails this, the marriage is forfeited,” the Jona said, seriously.

Garek took Angeni’s hand. Her small fingers wrapped through his.

“You can use my humble little colony of course,” his sly grandmother continued.

Garek laughed. “Should Angeni agree to this thing, I want a fighting chance. The only living beings that can survive out there are Squarond snakes, Lister frogs and too many species of scorpions.”

His grandmother laughed again. Things were looking up for the Jona’s reign. A part of Garek enjoyed giving her this renewed hope.

“The prestige of a success on this outpost might be worth the extra effort grandson.”

“Her life is too precious.”

She nodded in acknowledgement. “Of course, you are correct. Male pride must not outweigh your care for the woman.”

She'd tested him and he had passed. "The Ritual will have to wait," Garek said.

"Why so?" the Jona demanded.

"We have to relocate the Olandian women first. They are in danger."

The Jona held up an imperious hand, "Clothoes law is clear. There can be no delays. We cannot risk the birth of an unsanctioned female child. The Archon clan cannot afford it."

Garek squeezed Angeni's hand lightly. He did not want her frightened by his clan's urgent need for a future leader.

"I see no reason to hurry the healers' departure from Triastra." The Jona's eyes narrowed. "Their rights must be observed. It is our duty as a member of the Alliance to assist in this. I have summoned a delegation of Clothosians to welcome—"

"No doubt the finest studs you can find will be among the delegation," Garek said.

Disapproval etched the Jona's face. "You are coarse to speak so!" Her eyes turned to the third man by the entry. "I see you still travel with this insolent Aldorian pup. He's a bad influence on you." The Jona spoke as though her train of thought had just led her to Coyle. But her tone had lost all its venom.

"You are just as sweet and charming as ever, Grandmother Jona." Coyle stepped forward and lifted Alda Sahnjun off the ground, kissing her cheek with a loud smacking sound. "You can't shun me. I'm adopted into your prestigious clan."

"Perhaps I can find you a bride as well. You would thrive on The Challenge."

"It's been too long, my lavender cactus flower." Coyle had not left the ship the last landing. "Are you well and happy on this purple sphere?"

"Set me on my feet. You make me dizzy."

"Angeni is my sister, Grandmother Jona," Coyle whispered as he put her down.

The older woman touched her throat. Tears came to her eyes. "I hoped you would find her."

“You knew he had a sister?” Garek demanded.

She waved a hand. “I wasn’t sure. I knew he thought he had a sister. I thought it the remnants of a child’s dream. Forgive me, Coyle.”

“Forgiven,” he said. “Not your fault.”

She turned to Angeni, primly and pointedly removing Angeni’s hand from Garek’s. “Well, my dear, such a joy to know you are family already. The Archon clan stands behind whatever choice you make.”

“Thank you.”

“We have work to do,” Garek said. “Angeni and I will be in the computer room.” Angeni looked up at him with empathy in her beautiful eyes.

He escorted Angeni through the arched doorway.

Family causes the deepest pain, she said telepathically.

We have other matters more urgent to deal with.

“I will send food for the two of you, Garek,” came from the Jona. Surprised by the kind tone, he turned and nodded.

Chapter Seventeen

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“What will we be looking for in mating matches?” Angeni asked later, as she began to sort the genetic information.

“We need to search the gene pool of each Alliance district. Any colony planet, except Olandia.”

“Of course.”

“From those, we’ll draw a smaller random sample.”

“I see. Good.”

Garek’s devilish grin flashed again. “Next, we have to match the superior intelligence you Olandian ladies have. Wouldn’t want the women bored.”

Angeni laughed. “If the candidates have smiles yours, a gap in intelligence level will go unnoticed.”

He kissed her, quick and hard for that.

“We have to work,” she murmured. She would support Garek in this forced marriage for now, but her heart dreaded the moment she freed him and he would surely walk away from her again. “Mates should come from communities in need of healers,” she went on, missing the heat of his lips against hers. He could have kissed her a bit longer, in spite of her reminder of work.

“Every colony in every district.”

“Yes,” she nodded, aware he spoke the truth. “Olandia has been selfish with her healing secrets.”

“She has.”

“What can I do to help?”

He looked at her a moment. “Simple. Our goal is to get as far away from Olandia’s bloodlines as possible.”

“As done with Galvordian racing dogs a few hundred years ago? Bringing in ancient lines?” she asked.

He nodded. “Exactly. When we’ve compiled the initial list of men, they will be notified and given an opportunity to decline to participate. The volunteers will have psych profile evaluations done.”

“Of course,” she agreed.

“And, at the top of the stack, we have Alliance Commander, Coyle Oside.

She gasped. “You wouldn’t.” Turning from her monitor she sought his face. Was he joking?

“I would. As a matter of fact, it was part of the original deal I made with him. Before I accepted my role in this—” He waved a hand. “This Cultural Exchange.”

“Like the PRAX?”

“Yes.”

She took a deep breath. “Your reasons for being reluctant were?”

He laughed cynically. “The project is insane, Angeni. I wager it’s doomed from the start. People have free will. They can’t be bred like livestock.”

She raised a brow. “Of course not, but this is a peculiar exception, rare circumstances.”

“Perhaps.”

“Olandians are more at risk than was thought. How does Coyle fit the criteria?” she asked as he scanned the data before him.

He looked at her. “Do you want me to back off? Leave your half-brother out of this?”

“You would do that? At my request?”

“Be no fun, but I would.” He grinned.

If she asked him to leave her brother out, he would. Her heart filled with warmth. But she shook her head. “I will not interfere in your prior agreement. He seems lonely.”

Garek spoke, “He’s an ideal candidate. Living in an area in desperate need of healers. No problem there. His permanent residence is on Clothoes. Plenty genetic variability. No problem there, thanks to his ancestor’s long history of conquering and taking the lady spoils back home. DNA surprisingly close to yo—”

“You’re serious aren’t you?” She forced a casual tone to her voice. “The Aldorian people made a habit of kidnapping women?” She stopped and looked at him, curious. Ready to defend her native people.

Garek face held sympathy. He moved close and kissed her again, then went back to work. Her mouth burned from the touch. She soothed it with her fingers.

“There’s truth to what I said.”

“Ownership,” she whispered.

His handsome blue eyes sought hers. “Are you offended I speak of your people, Aldorians, this way?”

She lifted her chin. “I have no logical reason to be offended. Coyle’s level of intelligence is well above the acceptable range for the mating trial,” she said.

“Perhaps not as high as he thinks, but not bad.”

“That’s my new sibling you’re casting aspersions upon.”

“You feel protective of your brother?”

“Yes,” she said. Her words were fierce with no pause for thought. “One can never have too many relatives. A new brother is a miracle of a kind.”

“Can’t have too many relatives? Wait until you attend a Clothoes clan festival,” he said, his voice touched with sarcasm, he shook his head.

“Large crowds?”

“Yes. It was a shock for you, meeting your brother?”

“A nice shock. He’s a nice man.”

Garek's expression turned serious now. "He's a good man. Nice—I wouldn't go that far."

"I could look at the karyotypes for serious genetic disorders," she suggested. "If we play Creator, we may as well do a full job of it."

He casually touched her knee causing a disturbing surge of awareness through her body. She took a deep breath to steady her pulse.

"That's the spirit. We'll get the computer started doing the tedious sorting, and we'll sit back and interfere in people's lives."

"We also could look at temperament too. You offworlder males don't seem to have the even tempered nature of Olandian men."

He gave her another of his handsome smiles and laughed. "You've made that scientific observation have you?"

He leaned toward her, taking some of her hair in his fingers, stroking it between thumb and forefinger. She felt a sharp aching in her feminine core. He pulled her even closer. She could feel his breath now, hot and coming faster.

"A little aggression in a male has its benefits," he said.

I see. It's a good thing?

It is. Very good.

He touched his mouth to hers, retreated to look at her. Then he plundered her mouth with his own. Long moments of leisurely exploration later, he released her with apparent reluctance, moving back to his work. *You hypnotize me, Angel.*

She traced her lips with her tongue, tasting him on her lips. He saw and groaned. Perhaps they were not doomed to always work against each other. She dared to hope for a future with this man she loved above all others.

"Perhaps we should look at flatvid images also. I could offer the women's perspective on the aesthetic aspect."

“Genetics first. Pretty, symmetrical features do not rate much priority.”

Garek watched her. He experienced an overwhelming feeling of tenderness for her.

As she turned her attention back to her work, he felt his smile slide away.

Maybe she would find a fancy face in the machine that met her tastes better than his. The burn of jealousy and uncertainty flooded his system. He fought hard to control it. He was a civilized man after all. If she were really his. ...

“How will the participants meet?” she asked.

He brought his thoughts back from images of them making love. “The Alliance plans to throw a reception. Get them all in the same room, make formal introductions.”

“I can see it now. Vidcards on the tables marking the seating for future bondmates.”

“There will no doubt be kinks to work out.”

“Do you think Coyle will follow through with his agreement to volunteer?” She faced him again, her amber eyes searching his.

“You can count on it. He has a pathological need to keep his word. Trying to live down the legacy of his father.”

“Yes, his father is a dark legend.”

Garek stopped and took one of her small, warm hands in his. As fast as the touch, he was aroused for her.

“Concern for you may have been the motive for his involvement in the first place.”

“No.”

“And I did not know Coyle was protecting you when I maneuvered him into this agreement. I guessed the importance of the situation to him. But had no way to know his exact reason. He wanted me involved in escorting that slingship away from Olandia. I was damned angry he wasn’t telling me the whole truth.” He paused, searching for the right words. “I don’t like being used, even for a good cause.”

“I understand. Perfectly natural.” Her expression was sympathetic.

“Coyle avoids a permanent relationship with a woman like a plague.”

“He does?”

“He spoke of a woman once. Said he wasn’t sure if she was real or a dream.”

Her eyes lit. “Yes, I sensed someone in his thoughts. The images were from dreams. She looked familiar. I could not place her.” Her eyes lit. “Oh, my heavens, Sidra! It was Sidra.”

“Puzzling. Why would he dream of Sidra? As far as I know, he has not met her.”

“I don’t know. Maybe his dream woman just looks like her. Strange.”

“Don’t worry, Geni. We’ll line up a replacement for Coyle. At the last possible minute, we’ll offer him an escape. Until then, I’ll enjoy seeing him do some squirming.”

“You don’t fool me. You’re trying to help him,” Angeni declared. “With his romance issues. I begin to see the situation. You’re playing big brother again.”

Across from her, Garek looked startled, then thoughtful. “Perhaps it could be. He should damn well forget the dream woman. I’d like to see him settled with a family, happy. He deserves that.”

“You see a wife and family as a means to happiness?” She held her breath, awaiting his response.

“A man could want no more.”

She found herself very pleased with his answer. Perhaps there really was hope for the two of them after all.

Their conversation was interrupted by a beeping sound from the com.

“Sahnjun, here,” Garek answered.

“Warrick is trying to get in there to help you two,” Coyle said. “Can’t stall the flocking

bastard much longer. He's invoking Olandian law."

Garek laughed. "Must be making himself a pain to get distasteful words out of a Clothoes-schooled male like you, Age Brother."

"Very funny. Can you handle him there? He thinks you can't do without him."

"No. We do not need his brand of help here. Tell him we're done for the day. I'll be right there to help you get rid of him."

"Angeni, can you shut things down here when you're finished?"

"Of course." she nodded. Just a thing or two to finish.

*** * * ***

Sometime later, lost in her work, Angeni looked up at the noise of a buzz from the outer door. She left her seat and opened it. Hane stood there, towering over her and looking as dark as a great, rolling thundercloud.

"You should have activated the security panel and let it go through its check routine."

"Um, sorry."

"Did Sahnjun not explain it to you well enough?"

"He did mention it, yes."

"You had no idea who was on the other side of this door before opening it. You have no guard, no weapons. Your man is not protecting you as you deserve."

She sighed and smiled. "Heavens save me from overly protective males. You're right, of course, Hane. I'll remember in the future. I promise. Tight security measures are new to me, I'm afraid." She waved a hand. "Not much crime on Olandia."

"Yes, well—" He seemed somewhat mollified by that fact. "Sahnjun sent me to escort you to your room."

"I'm sure he did," she said, annoyed. Surely she could have made it a few doors safely

on her own.

“Our current situation warrants extra caution.”

“It does,” she nodded.

He nodded back, more a sharp salute than truly a nod. She smiled at his formality.

“Just one moment to finish. Then I will be with you.” She returned to the computers as she spoke.

He followed, then stood watching over her shoulder for long minutes.

“What are those line pictures on the screen?” he asked.

“They’re genetic profiles. We’re looking at the gene maps, karyotypes, of potential male participants in the cultural experiment. They tell us what each person is like. Skin color, eye color, other features. Illnesses now and future. We can simulate the person on the screen.” She pushed a few keys, and a flatvid photo image appeared, of the man whose genetic material was on screen, a few more strokes brought a holovid image as well.

“You can study illness this way?”

“Yes.”

“What do you need to get one of these karyotypes?”

“Hmmm?” she asked, not following. “Oh, you mean for a sample? We need the person’s records, of course.”

“No records.”

She looked at him. “No records? Then we would need a sample of tissue from the individual. Blood, skin or—”

He drew a long, very sharp looking knife from his belt. The silver blade flashed in the bright, artificial light.

She sucked in a breath.

He rolled up a sleeve of his black and white Alliance uniform and sliced a thin section of skin from his forearm. Blood seeped.

Damnation. For a moment she'd thought she'd need to fight another man in this adventure.

“Enough for a karyotype, Prime Healer?”

She looked at the bleeding skin still on his knife blade. “More than enough, I’m sure.” She reached for a clean slide set before the precious liquid fell to the tile floor and was lost.

“You would like me to map your genetic material?”

“Yes.”

“You want to participate in The Cultural Exchange?” She made a stabbing, wild guess.

The man looked taken aback at the thought, shaking his head violently. “No. By God, no. I want... I need my health checked.”

“Do you feel ill?” she asked, searching for an explanation to his behavior.

“No. But I know my labmates, the children born of my group, are all dead. I have outlived the last by more than one year.”

Now, she understood his urgency. His serious silver eyes reflected terrible pain when he spoke of the others. It was brief, but unmistakable hurt for the lost friends who surely had been his only family.

She called on her professional side, setting about preserving the sample. After a shaky moment to collect her thoughts she said, “You’re positive you are the last of your study then?”

“The last.”

“We must work fast,” she said.

“Yes. The side effects worsen. Thank you, Healer.” He turned, shoulders back and stiff, and went to stand at military attention by the door.

She would get help from her friend and colleague, Lexa Stolle. Lexa specialized in genetic disease. A brilliant protégé in her schooling days, starting higher learning while still a child. Angeni often consulted with her on issues concerning treatments for the genetically injured children. Luckily, Lexa was one of the women who’d volunteered for The Cultural Exchange.

Warrick had fumed about that as much as he had on the subject of Angeni’s own participation. He knew a side benefit for Lexa would be having the freedom to follow her own interests, rather than the Olandian research agenda.

If anyone could help Hane, it would be Lexa.

Chapter Eighteen

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That evening, delicate music from an instrument Angeni had never heard before, filled a large dancing hall. The room was in the home of the Jona. The music soothed her. The notes seemed to flow across her skin. It was hauntingly lovely.

Angeni’s friends among the ladies from Olandia seemed awed by the splendor. Dressed in colorful finery provided by their hostess, they basked in all the unaccustomed attention. They worked hard at home and had little time to socialize.

Most of the other guests were elders of Clothoes who lived on Triastra, friends of the Jona.

The Jona told them the ladies would be delighted by the unspoiled wilderness of the

rock planet, Clothoes. Why did they need to look farther than Clothoes for the potential males needed to bring fresh blood for Olandia? She also mentioned that Clothoes was the oldest culture in the Alliance, having the oldest human genes, next only to Aldor, a non-Alliance world. The Jona presented arguments to back up her offer. Not the least of which was her own people's population dynamics with more men than women, the opposite situation from Olandia.

"It would solve more than one Alliance problem," she said now, as Garek and Angeni approached.

"She's lobbying again," Garek whispered.

Angeni grinned.

When they reached the Jona, Garek kept a hand at Angeni's waist.

"You can be assured Clothoes will be represented fairly in this, but you cannot high-jack all the entire first wave of women."

The elegant lady laughed slyly, and changed the subject. "Where is Rehne?"

"Supervising the ship's refitting. We leave as soon as the ship is prepared for sling launch."

"I see," the Jona said stiffly. She accompanied the words with a commanding and regal tilt of her aristocratic head.

Angeni searched for clues to the other woman's thinking in her eyes. The plan for a hasty departure did not please the Jona.

"We must separate the Olandian women as soon as possible," Garek explained. "If they remain together, they're more vulnerable. At greater risk of kidnapping."

"Perhaps I could help with that," the Jona offered, looking thoughtful.

"I'm sure you can." Garek spoke with sarcasm loading his voice.

Angeni gave a warning squeeze to his bicep.

“How so, Jona?” she interjected.

“By providing the Olandian women with Clothoes citizenship. A perfect solution.”

“That would help. They could travel with Clothoes passports and legal protections?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sure they would be grateful to you,” he acknowledged. “The rights and privileges Clothoes women have would help keep them safe.”

“Rights you undermine with your offworld adventures, my grandson,” the Jona snapped.

“We can argue that point another time.”

“Yes. The women would have control of their children and property. The benefit to a male from Clothoes world would be clear.”

“The right to ensnare the Clothoes male of their choice, you mean,” Garek said in a tone laced with annoyance.

Angeni’s heart turned cold. Was he thinking of their situation? She’d told him she planned to set him free. That she had no interest in forcing him to wed her.

He looked at her now with concern, having read something of her thoughts.

“What do you think of the idea, Healer Traek?” the Jona asked.

“I’m sure my people will thank you for your generosity.” She smiled, a tactful smile, she hoped. “But shouldn’t children be shared by their parents? And not controlled by one or the other?” She couldn’t resist adding.

The Jona raised an expressive brow. “When you have the young ones with my grandson, you will find control of the babes an illusive thing, I promise you.”

The Jona knew they spoke of a different type of control. The mention of children, with Garek, had a startling affect on her stomach.

“Don’t frighten her away,” Garek said coolly.

“My son was not as willful as Garek,” the Jona went onward. “The only time his father defied his family, the most critical of all. He married a scientist, a modern woman.” The Jona moved her hand and the formal jewels adorning her hand flashed and sparkled. “Having a daughter was not a high priority to his wife. She spent most of her child bearing years studying prehensile-tailed skunks.”

“Skinks, Jona. A lizard.” Garek corrected with a touch of humor crinkling the corners of his eyes.

“Whatever. She was much too ... casual with her husband and sons. Carrying the boys all over Clothoes wilderness in search of fossils and those disgusting little creatures.”

“Disgusting? Those little creatures were some of my best childhood friends. We loved it.”

“You did indeed,” the Jona agreed.

Angeni could see a glimmer of the relationship these two could have had before their conflicts split them.

“She exposed her sons and Coyle to the adult world at will,” the Jona continued, warming to her complaint. “Against the spirit of our laws. Laws, mind you, which have served us very well for thousands of years. Sera kept the boys with her longer than males stay with their parents.”

Good for her, Angeni thought, deliberately opening the telepathic pathway to Garek now.

Angel, we cannot afford to make an enemy of the Jona just now.

She is a very pushy and judgmental woman.

I cannot argue with that fact.

The Jona paused, watching them, alert and suspicious before she continued, “Said she forgot. Imagine it. Sera knew very well what she was about.”

The older woman ignored Garek's comment, spearing him with her gaze. "All this freedom led to all sorts of alien ideas."

Angeni's temper rose a notch.

Angel?

Angeni could not remain quiet. "Surely new ideas lead to improvements."

"Yes, but Sera allowed too much of the suppressed blood of Garek's forefathers to surface."

Garek's attention was caught by movement across the room. "If you will excuse us? Coyle is motioning urgently for us to join him."

"Go. Angeni will stay with me a moment longer."

"Yes, I will join you in a moment."

Garek turned and left.

Angeni faced the Jona with grim determination. This woman could be as dangerous to Garek as the mercenaries in the underground. Worse perhaps, she could take his dreams. She felt the surge of protective instincts.

She must step cautiously. Cooperation with Clothoes could be important to The Cultural Exchange. She need not push so hard as to remind the Jona that the women from Olandia would be more like her son's independent wife. But she had no desire to back off altogether.

"Garek is too much like his grandfather, your mate?" Angeni asked, guessing. "Strong and proud. Independent."

Sadness darkened the older woman's eyes.

Around them the joyful melody still flowed, the voices raised and lowered in conversation.

"You are very perceptive, my dear. If you will excuse me, I must check the progress of

the meal,” was the Jona’s only answer before she turned in her elegant tracks and marched from the room.

As she watched the retreating figure of the Jona, she was approached by Lexa Stolle, the woman she hoped could help Hane.

“Angeni, Angeni, is it true?” Lexa asked in an excited voice, adjusting her glasses.

“Is what true?”

Her friend laughed. “I must slow down. Forgive me.”

With her friend’s studious hairstyle and colorless, shapeless clothing and no-nonsense others saw Lexa as unattractive. Angeni suspected was a carefully cultivated image

“Is it true? You were kidnapped by a mutant savage and brutally dragged through the subway tunnels on Olandia? I hear you were held over night! You do not look injured....” Her eyes moved over Angeni, seeking evidence of harm. “You don’t look at all worse for the wear.”

Angeni laughed. “You seem almost disappointed.”

“No...no, of course not.”

“What makes you say I was kidnapped?”

“You mean you were not stolen by a mutant?” Lexa whispered.

Warrick.

Lexa’s excitement level fell. The serious scientist approached playfulness in her enthusiasm for the possibility of a kidnapping fantasy and adventure. Lexa was spending too much time in her labs.

“No, Lexa, I most certainly was not kidnapped. There is no mutant savage. Well, not exactly.”

“But, Healer Warrick said you were taken away against your will. He rushed into the lobby of our hotel on Olandia, shouting about evil abductors and mutants, urging us to

leave with him at once.”

She stepped closer, like a conspirator.

“Then before we could follow him away,” Lexa lowered her voice even more. “Two of the most gorgeous men I’ve ever seen, came through the hotel lobby right behind Warrick. A tall man with long blonde hair and beautiful brown eyes. Not a combination one often sees. He had the most ... the most,” her voice became even lower, “indescribable mutant human with him. Transgenic, I suspect. There was the clear, but subtle influence from another species. He had silver-gray, sandpaper skin—overlapping like the scales of an ancient fish—but the most beautiful male bone structure beneath it all. And tall, with amazing posture.”

“Coyle and Hane.”

“Yes, Hane. His face reminds me of someone I’ve seen before. His long legs seem to float above the ground. Not possible, I know. Just a natural grace of movement. That wonderful skin would provide protection in hostile climates ... sandstorms. And the applications under water would be limitless.”

Angeni laughed, “What happened at the hotel?”

“Oh, yes, the hotel. It was too late to leave with Warrick. Coyle and Hane brought us all here, then left in their PRAX again. They were very courteous. Most unlike one would expect of a kidnapping.”

Angeni smiled at her friend. The other woman had a unique spirit. She saw and felt things others missed.

“No, I’m sorry to say, you were not kidnapped either.”

“Warrick said not to trust them.” She grinned. “But then, as you know, I’ve never trusted Warrick,” she whispered urgently. “Were they telling us the truth?” She ran out of breath.

Angeni laughed again at Lexa’s enthusiasm for the adventure. She was an intelligent woman, but no doubt Lexa’s life experiences had been limited to isolated laboratory research. She was virtually the only scientist in her particular narrow field of specialty and highly overworked. Where others followed money and fame, Lexa looked for challenging and worthy humanitarian causes. Rumor was she had an independent

source of funds from an inventor parent.

“Yes, you can trust Coyle and Hane to speak the truth.” Angeni inclined her head, wishing she could share that Coyle was her lost brother. Later. She’d known him brother and Hane only a number of hours, but she was confident they were honorable men. “You are being guarded for your protection only.”

“Good. Good. We were almost sure.”

“I fear your instincts about Froton Warrick’s motives are sound. Captain Sahnjun protected me as an official escort and did not abduct me. Warrick’s plans are threatened by the ASC’s Cultural Exchange.”

“I knew it,” Lexa whispered. She looked as if she wished to know more. “I shouldn’t speak of it. That is to say ... I, Oh, darn it, Angeni I’ve heard Warrick is to marry you. The rumors. Well.”

“Yes, I can guess what the rumors entail.”

“What is this all about? Why did we stop at this strange planet?”

“There are mercenary soldiers trying to interfere with the Alliance. Were you not told about the explosion onboard the PRAX slingship we were to travel on? Lives of two of our security force were lost.”

“Yes, they told us, but Froton says it is a lie to insure our cooperation.”

“Froton has been busy, has he not? You can reassure the others that you’re not kidnapped.” Angeni lowered her voice. “The Jona proposed Clothoes citizenship for our volunteers. Whatever happens, the entire group will be taken to public transportation center so you can separate and drop out of sight until we contact you. The mercenaries behind the explosion won’t know about the Clothoes citizenship. Warrick must not know. Not until it is too late to interfere.”

The other woman’s eyes lit with speculation. “Do you think Warrick hired the mercenaries?”

“I would not put it beyond him.”

“Do we get to keep our Clothoes citizenship later?”

Angeni had space for a brief nod.

“Of course, we won’t tell Warrick,” Lexa said. “All the ladies I traveled with are very serious about this project. We’ve bonded.” She touched Angeni’s sleeve. “Do you realize what it means to be a woman with Clothoes citizenship?”

Too much Angeni thought.

“They’re tops at protecting the rights of their females. And they have a gigantic public trust account as well.”

“Yes. And their children.”

Lexa’s eyes were alight with enthusiasm and something deeper, something like hope. “A husband can never take away a child with a false grievance against the mother.” Her friend’s tone of voice saddened and she looked off, as if into a remembered world.

Suddenly Angeni saw the Jona’s earlier statement in a new light. “Are you alright, Lexa?”

Her eyes blinked. “Fine. I’m fine.”

“You looked sad for a moment.”

“Aldor allows the male to own the children.”

Angeni wondered what Lexa knew of Aldor.

“I examined Clothoes as a special project in a psych class once. Did you know they have a unique marriage law?”

“So I’ve heard.”

“A male must wed any woman he has taken advantage of. An irony, since Clothoes men never harm a woman, statistically, I mean.” Lexa gasped. “You were alone with a Clothoes male over night. Saints. He must become your bondmate?”

“It seems so. But I can release him.”

“Oh, yes, of course you can ... but it would be a disgrace for him. A terrible failure.”

“He did not tell me that.”

“If you care for this man, you must not make a decision in haste, not in front of the Jona council.”

“Thank you Lexa, I will proceed with caution.”

Lexa turned to leave.

“Before you go ... I understand you rarely have a break such as this, but could you look at a genetic sample for me?” It’s urgent.”

“Of course.”

“It’s for Hane.”

“His genetic recoding is failing, isn’t it?”

“His lab mates are dead.”

“Oh, no,” Lexa gasped and went pale.

*** * * ***

“What’s going on?” Garek asked of Coyle when he joined him in a secluded spot at the edge of the room.

“Mail ships came in. Brought a message for us.” Coyle handed him a reader with a brief note on it.

“Individuals identifying themselves as Olandian students say they’ll attack Angeni’s school if she doesn’t return home.”

“Damn it all to a flyer’s hell. We’re not dealing with a few militant students.”

“I know.”

“I’ll bet Warrick is communicating with them.” Garek forced the words through gritted teeth.

“I think you’re right.”

“If we tip him off, could speed up the next move.”

“We need to keep him where we can see him,” Coyle agreed. “He’s not clever enough to do this alone. We have to find Warrick’s boss, fast.”

“If those bastards harm the little ones, it will destroy Angeni. She’ll blame herself.”

Coyle nodded sharply. “You’re right, of course.”

“We also heard from the Alliance,” Coyle continued. “Security swept Clothoes with long-range scanners. They say it’s safe to land at any public port. My contact with Security suggests we go back with the mail ship platoon for extra safety.”

“Can you trust your contact?”

“Yes,” Coyle said.

“I say we take a security officer pretending to be Angeni back to Olandia,” Garek suggested.

“That might work. Be safer for my sister.”

“No,” Angeni said from close behind them.

“It’s a reasonable plan,” Garek said.

“No. I will do it.”

“She will be without your natural blood thirst and instinctive fighting abilities.” Garek stopped speaking as he saw the sparks of fire in her eyes turn to pain.

“Garek,” Coyle cautioned, angered.

“Yes, well ... that may be,” she said.

That was a low blow ... and unfair, he communicated.

Fair enough. It's true.

*Angel, I'm—*At that moment, Garek saw a crossroad. At the fierce frown on her stubborn face, he'd realized he loved her. With all his soul. It was humbling. He would never be the same if he lost her.

“They want me in trade for the children. I won't risk tricking them.” Angeni drew herself up, daring him to contradict her choice.

“They don't have the children yet,” Coyle interjected.

“We can't let them get to them,” she said.

“I have another plan,” Coyle offered. “I sent Hane back to Olandia in a shuttle craft.”

“Why?” Garek asked.

“For the Aldorian woman, Sidra.”

“To protect her or arrest her? Angeni demanded.

“Angeni—” Coyle began.

“She has been loyal to me this past year.”

“You knew she was not a robot?”

“Yes, Garek knew and told me to keep my eyes open.”

“At any rate, it's easy to inform Hane that his mission has changed.”

Chapter Nineteen

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“Garek you must complete the Challenge Ritual,” the Jona demanded.

Garek’s ship sat in the center of a caravan of mail ships, preparing for launch. As employees loaded the ships with Triastra mail and unloaded supplies, the Jona strode back and forth on the loading dock.

“Your commitment began with your night on Olandia. You are honor bound to complete the marriage as soon as possible.”

Garek looked at his grandmother and returned his attention from entering information into an Alliance computer.

“What are you trying to tell me, Jona?”

She tilted her head, arrogance in the jut of her chin. “You will not receive my signature on those citizenship papers until you and Angeni complete The Challenge Ritual. And the bonds of your union are sealed.”

“I don’t have time to negotiate with you. What’s in this for you, Jona? Do you enjoy manipulating the lives of others to this extent?” He’d worked fast and furiously to finish his work and he was tired and hungry.

“A great-granddaughter,” she whispered simply.

She’d never said the words to him before. He had not expected them now. She’d often talked of roots, family, tradition, their heritage and a hundred other damn things.

“I’m an aging woman.”

“Rehne and Illana will give you a granddaughter.”

She drew in a sigh, as if in agony. “It seems Rehne can have no children.”

“I didn’t know,” Garek said. He felt pain for his brother. “Medical intervention has failed?” he asked.

“No hope. It was not meant to be for them.

“I’m sorry to hear it.”

“You must cement your marriage before you leave here. You must do your duty.”

“I did my duty to Clothoes once before.”

Her face seemed to grow still and old. He took a deep breath.

“We can’t afford a delay. Those children mean a lot to Angeni. Can’t.”

“They say the Muscovan has gone to guard the little ones,” she argued.

He lowered his voice to a harsh whisper, “I need time to get the woman to come to me willingly, without other people and other worlds on our shoulders.”

“If you delay, there will be no citizenship for the Alliance ladies,” she stated with determination.

“Do you think it ethical to make the offer, then pull back?”

“No. I do not,” she admitted.

Satisfied with her honesty he said, “Just put your palm on this damned screen and authorize the papers. All these women will be easy targets if you don’t.”

“I see no reason you cannot fulfill the first phase of the matrimonial requirements on the ship between here and Clothoes,” she insisted.

“On the PRAX?”

Her eyes were alight now. “Yes, I will come along, of course. I will see that the ritual is performed correctly. Then you can stop three days in the Clothoes Mountains. Only three days delay. I insist. I cannot live forever, Grandson.” Her eyes were sad.

* * * *

“Damn.” Garek removed a swath of silk draping cloth out of his way. The cloth, with fine silver adornments, covered too much of the console screen. He tossed it aside. His grandmother’s army of minions was everywhere. They had a very unhealthy disregard for life-support quotas along the ship. If atomic smear didn’t get them, he would.

Even as they flew through space with the mail ships, the marital ceremony phase was on schedule. His grandmother’s schedule.

Angeni appeared to be cooperating completely. Damned if he understood why. No one to blame for all this but himself. He’d started it all. He could have kept his mouth shut about Clothoes’ customs.

The ties would soon be tightened.

“I thought I would find you here. What ties?” Angeni said, as she swept through the doors to the bridge.

“Nothing. I forgot to shield my thoughts.”

“You’ve gotten far too good at blocking our telepathic communications. Things would be much simpler if I could read your thoughts at times now,” she said, looking down at her lovely hands.

“Don’t,” he said.

She lifted her troubled amber eyes. “We wouldn’t have to dance around, blindly groping to an understanding of motives.

“The intimacy of the telepathy troubles me,” he admitted.

“I know. Oh, what an exquisite piece of art,” she declared, distracted by the discarded wedding cloth. She bent to pick it up, caressing the luxurious material. “The Jona is enjoying herself.”

“The Jona is out of control.”

“You don’t have to go through with this farce.”

She stepped toward him, urgency clouding her expression. “A farce? Garek, I’ve done some reading in the ship’s library. This is very real to Clothoes.” She began pacing the small confines of the cockpit, unconsciously crunching the fancy cloth in her hands. Her face reflected anger. “The things your grandmother is teaching me, you wouldn’t believe. She calls them male management skills.”

He smiled at her righteous indignation. “Oh, I’ve heard rumors. The usual bits and pieces passed down from generation to generation.”

“You seem much too complacent about this. The Jona is trying to teach me methods of control. As though you were an animal I must train. The things we humans can accept because it’s the way of our parents—”

“True.”

“It amounts to hypnosis. Or dream influence.”

“I could never manipulate you like that.”

Her expression was sad. What a passionate woman she was. He hoped all that passion would carry over to her marriage bed. His body responded, hot and hard, to the thought. He turned back to the console, pretending to work, hoping not to do real damage to any systems. How would he let her go once he’d had her in his bed and made love to her fully?

“She’s even teaching me the rudiments of mental telepathy.”

He laughed. “You appreciate the irony, no doubt.”

“She said she noticed we read each other well.”

“We do.”

“I’m supposed to think of the color pink when I want to calm you during lovemaking.”

Garek choked and struggled to control erotic thoughts and the blood beating through his body just from her words. “Our women must be protected from males who would use their size as a weapon. The men of Clothoes understand the need for these methods.”

“Should Clothoes sacrifice its sons to protect its daughters?”

He glanced at her but gave her no answer. He didn’t have one. He could only think of how glorious she was in her anger. Of wanting to claim her right here and right now.

“It’s close to time for the ceremony, isn’t it?” Angeni asked, once again stroking the discarded silk draping. “This is far too beautiful for the floor.”

“Dolan cloth is made the same way as centuries ago. It is symbolic of the female softening Clothoes.”

“Hah,” she grumbled.

“The wedding phase, The Joining, will be completed at the first mail stop. Coyle will attend as witness for your clan. The trial phase, The Challenge, will take place when we reach Clothoes.” He waited. The silence stretched.

“Tell me what is involved, what is expected of me.” Her expression was clouded with uncertainty.

He ran a hand through his hair, forming his words. “The Challenge is a marriage consummation ritual with origins as far back as my people have kept written works.” He paused, searching for the correct words. “Part sex and part survival,” he said, his voice more harsh than he meant. “A Clothoes marriage ceremony is not the flowers and pretty words of Old Mother Earth tradition.”

Her eyes grew round.

He forced himself to continue in a softer tone. “It’s rooted in thousands of years of primitive practice. It has served my people well.”

“I see. You should be proud of a long tradition.”

“However odd?”

“Yes, well, however unique.”

He laughed. She was so beautiful to him. He ached to hold her. “The Challenge tests the man’s ability to provide physical protection for the woman. And the children they

will have later.”

“If the male fails, the marriage is dissolved before it begins?” she asked, now fisting her small hands at her side.

“Right. We will spend two nights and three days in the mountains of Clothoes. I have the duty to make sure we stay alive long enough to find food and begin a family. That’s the theory. These days there are few real risks to the lives of the couples involved.”

“As a healer, I must insist on com devices for emergencies.”

He nodded. “A sound suggestion. Shouldn’t be a problem.”

She folded her arms beneath her breasts, unknowingly enhancing their lovely shape.

“Garek, I’ve little experience of making love. I suppose I thought this would be pretence but the Jona says we must,” she whispered. “Of course, a couple has sex to have children. It’s inevitable. Even so.”

He forced himself to adopt a waiting expression rather than remind her of her commitment to the ASC genetic trial. Her thoughts were a bit jumbled at the moment, but he sensed she’d anticipated a longer time to get used to her faceless Alliance mate.

She continued, “Well, you may not know, Olandians ... when they come to university age, pairings are arranged by families, a mating partner, is found, then they begin their life away from home.”

He was unsure of her meaning.

“Many form bonds for life,” she said.

“Yes?”

She pressed on. “Well, you should know my assigned mate preferred another girl.” She paused, her expression serious, pained.

He stiffened as the meaning of her words sank in. “Barbaric custom to arbitrarily pair up the young people.”

“You make a fair point.”

“I shouldn’t have said that. Continue.”

“Later,” she paused, then rushed on, “Later, I was so involved in post study and research. Time goes so fast. I can’t say why, really ... but I’ve, er, not been attracted...”

“There has been no one?”

“No, not before...” Her cheeks flushed.

Beautiful. He allowed his expression to tell her he knew that she meant him. Founder’s God help him. His body ached with renewed urgency now.

He remembered their first kisses and his certainty she’d been too busy for a lover. He smiled, relishing the fact.

He nodded, unable to move, to speak. Or he might make a grab for her.

“You do not seem concerned.” She took a relieved breath. “You’re not looking at me as defective.”

His heart melted. “Come here, love,” he said.

She stepped into his arms, as he’d asked. A man could be humbled by such ready obedience. Again, he found himself wondering how this sort of thing would translate to her marriage bed. And his pulse rate shot upward. He might not survive this moment. She felt good in his arms, warm and soft.

“On Clothoes, we are exiled from women at age fourteen,” he whispered into her fragrant hair. He could not resist stroking the soft strands.

Angeni snuggled into Garek’s masculine warmth, her body alive with sensation. “Yes?” she asked, encouraging him onward.

“We are given hormonal suppressant implants at that time. Reputed to be a civilizing measure.”

“Like the color pink?”

He laughed. “Another part of the Ritual I need to explain. The wife has the honor of —” Not faring much better with this discussion than she had, he took a break to organize his thoughts before he continued, “The right of removing the implants from the mate’s left bicep during the ceremony. The hormone suppressant drug is another precaution for our women. The incidence of premarital sex is reduced.”

“Left bicep?” She mumbled into his chest. She drew away slightly. “Oh, my Saints, Garek I’ve already removed it.”

He gasped and tightened his arms around her.

“No one could tell me what purpose the implant served. Your arm was severely injured. It was in my way ... I didn’t have it analyzed. Careless of me, really. Time was critical, your arm,—”

Garek stepped away, looking shocked speechless. Then he began to laugh and shake his head.

“—your muscle was badly lacerated. Scar tissue might have trapped the implant under the skin permanently.” She made a gesture of exasperation. “We need a manual for these cultural anomalies.”

“That would explain a great deal,” he said, still laughing with relieved enjoyment. “Yes, it explains many small differences. Explains the passionate night dreams that featured the beautiful, amber-eyed lady.”

She felt her cheeks flush with color. Of course, the first woman he’d seen after the removal of the implant. The first he held. Her heart lurched with insecurity and doubt about his attraction to her. Was their bond as natural as she’d once believed?

“Should have guessed,” he said. “So, we Clothoes males must not be quite the animals we’re reported to be when it comes to matters of sex.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re led to believe we would attack any female blocking our path without those implants. Damn, this may be another Clothoes first to my credit. The first unattached male to roam about without the hormone suppressing implant.”

He threw back his head and laughed, his blue eyes sparkled. He was so clearly pleased, she laughed with him. The extent of the harsh treatment of Clothoes males was stark, yet he was content, even proudly embraced his culture.

Just as she loved Olandia, in spite of its faults.

She moved back into the circle of his arms, took his bicep in her hand, looking for the fine scarring. She traced along it. “With the implant gone, my holding you in the hospital could have kicked your subconscious libido into hyper drive,” she whispered, paying no attention to what she had just revealed.

“You held me?”

“I slept with you.”

He raised a brow.

“Please let me explain fully. You were restless. I couldn’t be sure the machines would stand up to your assaults on them. My presence, my thoughts, calmed you.”

“No wonder I recognized the feel of you in my arms.” Suddenly Garek was jealous. “Do you sleep with many of your patients, Healer?”

“Of course not. A ridiculous question.”

He dragged a hand through his already mussed hair. “Yes. My apologies. I do not seem to be a reasonable man today.”

“I would never do such a thing. Never.”

“Never?”

“Well, only the once.” She fought unshed tears, blinking them away. “I admit I shouldn’t have even in your case. It was unusual for a Prime Healer, any healer. You were soothed by my presence and no other. I didn’t know of the science behind the implant. I should have tested it. I assumed it was Alliance Guard, only disease protection as Olandians use implants. I didn’t understand your social taboos. Saints, I’m a healer, not an anthropologist. No excuse.”

“Stop,” he said. His blue eyes bored into hers.

“How can Clothoes be so cruel to its sons?” The tears fell down her cheeks. She swiped at them, impatient with herself.

Oh, God. Suddenly Garek grabbed his temples as if to steady the sudden ache in his head. **“You are thinking of the future of your own sons. I can feel the anxiety in your thoughts.”**

Garek could not stand feeling her pain.

It’s so unfair.

He winced as the words bombarded him.

I know, love, he answered softly, trying to sooth her, awkwardly rubbing her back.

I forgot our mental bond for a moment. Inexcusable.

But, understandable, my angel. You are human after all.

Angeni stepped back, working harder at shielding her private thoughts from him now. Her heart ached at the new possibility she pondered. That the sole reason for his interest in her at all was her clumsy blundering through his customs. The lack of an implant. She couldn’t bear it to be so. She pulled away.

“Garek,” she whispered.

I will kiss you now. He took her hand and drew her back to him, matching his words to actions, holding her lips captive with his, and drawing out the meeting of their mouths.

That’s it, love, hold on tight.

He spread his stance and with hands at her waist he drew her hips between his legs. Heaven.

Garek, this is very intimate.

Yes, it’s sweet torture. He kissed the tip of her nose, ran a line of kisses along her jaw to her neck.

She sucked in a trembling breath and closed her eyes, savoring him. His hands skimmed upward along her ribs to her breasts. She held her breath, then cried out at his touch.

He smiled his joy. Finding the closures to her garment, he followed with his lips, then with lathing strokes. Her skin heated.

Suddenly a chiming sound warned the door would open, interrupting their moment of closeness.

Reluctantly, Garek set Angeni apart from him and shielded her from view. He could feel her movements behind his back as she hastily refastened her dress.

The doors to the control center slid open. A man of indeterminate age swept in, a heavy wool carpet rolled and bent downward over one of his frail shoulders.

Paying them no mind, and unabashed at intruding, the elderly gentleman, a loyal friend of his grandmother, took the swath of silk Angeni still held in her hand.

“I’ll take that, Madam Healer.” His long bony fingers reverently clasped the material, smoothing out the wrinkles. “Sacred cloth must not be crushed. The grand lady wants everything finished right away. The ceremony must begin soon.”

“Obak, I warned you about the life supports.” Garek was as much frustrated with the man as concerned. “If we go through a chaotic loop as you open that door, your atomic structure might not make it through in tact. Do you understand me?”

What? He asked when Angeni laughed.

Your Clothoes accent is sweet.

Sweet, you say? Garek demanded telepathically.

Charming? Better?

Go back to shielding your thoughts from me now.

She laughed.

Obak cleared his throat, giving them a knowing look and smile. “I understand your ship’s technology very well, Jonason,” Obak said. “I also doubt the dreaded experience could compete with the grand lady in a temper. Being busted up into bits and particles for eternity might be a relief in comparison, m’boy.”

Garek chuckled. “You’re probably right.”

Chapter Twenty

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Garek and Angeni stood side-by-side, dressed in formal Clothoes wedding attire. Her flowing gown was a feminine rose pink. She radiated beauty, with sprinklings of mixed flowers in lavender shades in her hair. He took a deep breath, allowing himself to believe she really was there.

A black cloak with a white lining, hung heavy about his shoulders, the weight of the cloth designed to remind him of the heavy responsibilities he assumed. The small ship’s bridge carried as many decorations as any Clothoes wedding cave.

He reached out and took Angeni’s trembling hand in his. Open touching was not tradition, and the Jona showed her disapproval with a censuring frown, but said nothing. Obak smiled in approval and swiped away a tear droplet from his aging eyes. The promise ceremony was always a small event with few in attendance. Only the Jona, Obak, and Coyle joined them and stood quietly by.

The Jona moved to light the sacred candles. As soon as they caught fire and blazed steadily, she said, “The marriage ceremony will begin. Does any clan have claim against this man?”

“None, Madam Jona,” Obak said, his voice solemn. “This man has no other woman.

And no other children.”

Garek glanced at Angeni who looked awed by the simple service. He should not have demanded this of her.

She gave him a tentative smile.

It seems to me, I got you involved first. She whispered the words into his mind.

True. Try not to distract me with your seductive mind words, Angel.

She answered him with a surprised laugh. The Jona looked disapproving now.

Garek winked conspiratorially at Angeni.

“The would-be groom will speak,” the Jona said, looking as if she suspected she was missing some sort of interplay.

Garek looked deep into Angeni’s amber eyes, holding her gaze. She returned the look steadily. “I promise to guard you, as my wife, with my life,” Garek said. “I will find the water and food our children will need to live and grow. Angeni Traek of Olandia, sister to Coyle Oside, will you allow me the honor of proving this to you?”

Without hesitation, she replied, “Garek Sahnjun, I will grant you the time allotted by Clothoes law to prove your sincerity and your abilities.”

Angeni spoke the ancient Clothoes words of the ritual with accuracy and a solid, unwavering voice. Hearing the words, his heart swelled with pride. She had had so little time to learn them. He felt invisible strings wrap around his heart.

Her small fingers turned his hand palm down, a symbolic gesture to assure the woman there was no other ring on his hand. Garek leaned forward, as she placed a gold ring on a silver chain around his neck. The ring would go on his hand if he completed the Challenge Ritual. In that moment, he thought it a shame the woman was not required to wear his ring as well.

Thank you, Angel, he whispered into her thoughts. Garek kissed her forehead in a chaste gesture.

“Ahem,” the Jona cleared her throat loudly, as a signal he had gone too far with the contact. He could not resist giving his grandparent a broad smile.

He sensed Angeni’s confusion and indecision. He knew she had doubts and had always planned to free him of the obligation as soon as possible. He could not let that happen.

“By the authority of the clan council, I say the Challenge phase will begin in three days.” The Jona decreed.

*** * * ***

The Challenge phase would begin soon. Angeni walked along a clearing through a row of elderly, gnarled trees. It was early summer on Clothoes planet. A soft wind rustled through the tall green grassland and the bright yellow grain fields on Garek’s station.

Behind her, the road led back to his home and offices, just visible in the distance. The large building was gray and constructed of natural materials. She’d left him there to catch up with neglected work.

In the distance, robotic machines worked the fields. On a horizon filled with an endless straight line of fencing, they moved forward toward the station complex. ““They’re efficient as long as they can go straight. We have to send in a human crew for any cornering. Tangle themselves easily,”” Garek had said of the machines. Something struck her as beautiful about the simple non-humanoid mechanicals. The rhythm of their movements, the hydraulic swooshing sound of their joints.

Angeni would never forget stepping from the underground spaceport to the surface, it felt like coming home. The planet was all flat plains and great stretches of deep soil along the rivers. Heavily eroded red mountains hovered like an orange wall in the distant west. The sky above, a deep shade of blue and spotted with fluffy clouds, seemed to stretch on forever. And Clothoes, with its abundant plants offered the freshest air she’d experienced. She’d quickly fallen in love with this wondrous new world, almost as quickly as she fell for its citizen, Garek.

The fragrance of wild flowers floated to her, causing her a wistful sigh, regretting she had no time at present to enjoy her hobby of searching the landscape for medicinal plants.

She hadn’t had a moment to dwell on the backward way she and Garek were moving forward with their deep attraction to each other. She smiled, remembering the

tenderness of his hand as it held hers the day of the wedding aboard ship. She'd allowed herself to pretend he stood by her by choice, and was not bound by his culture to say those words.

She knew with all her feminine instincts that Garek would be a good mate and a good father. He did not need to prove it to her. He already had.

Garek seemed distant now, distracted. He'd answered all her questions about the animal breeding operations here, always treating her with formal hospitality. He'd said the near station worked with over forty varieties of domesticated animals. And there was a sanctuary for exotic wildlife deep in the mountains.

Threatened animal species from other worlds were brought to there and bred to safer population levels.

The dangerous species, like large cats, wore tranquilizer implants while in captivity. The implants could be activated in an emergency. This allowed the animals more freedom of a wild existence.

They'd avoided the more pressing subject, the coming Challenge.

The low rumble of a ground shuttle interrupted her thoughts.

She turned as Garek stopped the vehicle, hovered, and then landed it behind her. The soft breeze from the engine's impellers swirled her red silk skirt against her legs and dislodged a few leaves from the trees.

Garek seemed to take a long moment just looking at her.

Her cheeks flushed under his gaze.

"Hello, Angel" he said. "I looked for you. I was worried. Wondered if you'd decided to escape all this." He smiled, but his eyes looked serious. "Thought maybe you'd come to your senses and declined to go through with this bizarre Clothoes tradition. Or, worse, perhaps you believed Healer Warrick's claims about me."

"Warrick's hateful words do not concern me."

He came closer then and took her hand in his.

Her heart thrummed heavily.

He looked more relaxed than in recent days.

She looked down to their joined hands. Perhaps she represented responsibility to him, mere duty. She wished for more. Emotions flooded her, but she forced them deep in her mind so he would not feel them, or hear them expressed in telepathic words.

“You walked farther than I expected,” he continued. “The marriage challenge begins tonight.”

“At night? I thought it would begin tomorrow morning.”

“There are caverns in the foothills,” Garek said. “We will find shelter there.”

“We seem destined to visit caves and tunnels,” she said in answer.

“There is much to be done yet today. We will have help from my employees and Grandmother’s minions, but we need to find shelter before darkness.”

“We will take the trogon with us. Horses would have been available thousands of years ago. Are they permitted in the Challenge?”

He seemed to search her face before he answered. “Yes, in fact horses were the means of transportation. Thinking you might need the edge provided by telepathic, flying warhorses, Angel?”

She lifted her chin. “Yes. I suppose I do.” She gave him a half-smile and bravely stepped closer to him. “Our unknown foe...” She noticed he looked away from her to the horizon. His eyes clouded. His smile faded away.

She went on, “I know Aza and Nethe. I understand how they interpret their surroundings.”

He dropped her hand from his.

“Of course,” he agreed.

“It could take a long time for me to adjust to the wavelengths and language of Clothoes

horses. I could form a connection with enough time, but we don't have..."

"You're right, of course. We do not have that luxury. Once begun, the Ritual must proceed. We'll take Nethe and Aza if it makes you feel more secure," he said. "But you miss the whole point of the ritual, Angel. It's my job to protect you—not yours to protect me."

In his eyes a momentary fierce anger flashed and as quickly disappeared.

"It is not that I don't think you could keep us safe."

He raised a brow. "No?"

"I want to contribute. After all, it is because of my people, the Olandian people, that you are tying yourself to a stranger." *Deny it, please*, she wished, willing him to hear her thoughts. In the past hours, his mind had been even more shielded than ever before. Perhaps the Clothoes atmosphere interfered. *Tell me that you don't feel we are strangers*, she tried again. Her head ached with the effort of focusing her thoughts.

He laughed harshly. "We will never be strangers, Angel."

Chapter Twenty-One

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As Garek loaded supplies in packs and quickly onto Nethe's and Aza's backs, Angeni smiled at their indignant expressions as they curled their necks back to see the process. The Jona was there, along with Obak. Her brother had gone back to the ship.

"Have you finished rolling up the sleeping blankets?" the Jona asked of Obak. The older woman was meticulous in cross-referencing the supplies against a list written on

ancient paper. The stiff old paper crinkled and rustled in the light breeze. The contrast to the high-tech reader Obak fussed with was striking.

At Obak's nod, the Jona said, "We move on to the food items then."

"These supplies are exact replications of those in everyday use by my ancestral people some three thousand years ago, my dear," the Jona said to Angeni.

"I see," Angeni said, politely. She apparently had no task in the proceedings and was to stand around like a queen, decked out in her soft and colorful cotton garment. She flexed her fingers in the cloth. Once again she would be riding in a dress.

The bridles on the trogon were one-piece leather straps, similar to the Aldorian warbridles she used herself. The only difference was an exotic silver bit, its concentric circles attached to very short shanks. Nethe and Aza had accepted the strange bits and bridles at her guidance. There were no saddles, only jagged-edged fragments of white fleece. She reached out to feel the material.

Now rolled and strapped on at each trogon's wither were sleek hide blankets of shining brown fur. Aza and Nethe seemed changed by the garb. They were restless, stamping their hooves and flexing their wings. Obak stepped away, wary of them. Even the Jona moved away a time or two at their posturing and the snuffling noises they blew through their nostrils.

We will fly soon, Hippiatra? Aza asked, still unused to her new freedom.

Not today. We must not frighten our new friends too much. She glanced at Garek, he seemed changed as well.

She could almost believe he'd transformed into the savage Froton Warrick had called him. Warrick would be intimidated indeed if he were to see the man before her now. His shoulders seemed even broader. His thighs more powerful.

Suddenly Garek's eyes jerked to hers. Heavens above, he'd heard her thought. He smiled a slashing, sexy smile, melting her off at the knees then turned back to his tasks.

She crossed her arms at her chest and stared her fill of him. He wore suede chaps covering thick cotton britches. A bow and arrow quiver slung loosely over one of his shoulders, and a silver knife stuck through the clan belt he wore. A rampant eagle was etched on its shining surface.

An unreasonable touch of fear washed over her and Angeni trembled. She tried without success to suppress the fear, fear of the man and the circumstance in which she found herself.

Your feelings are part anticipation. Nothing to worry about. Garek's deep voice soothed her. The softness of it so different from his powerful body language. She nodded sharply in answer, trying to believe him, and then looked into the distance at the red mountains.

It is time. We will ride into those mountains, take shelter for the night, and the marriage bond will begin. "It is time, Angeni," Garek said aloud as he turned to face her. A primitive fierceness still burned in his eyes. He held out a hand, beckoning.

She held back.

He stiffened and his eyes narrowed. "The Challenge begins. Say now if you will stay or go."

With sharp feminine insight, she realized it cost him to make the offer. His face was rigid. She returned his gaze with a confidence her trembling legs did not back up.

He came toward her with purposeful strides, leading Aza.

"Ready?"

The Jona and Obak had slipped away.

"I'm ready," she said.

"We go then."

"Yes," she said softly.

He picked her up. A tremor swept her whole body. His tight grasp took her breath. Effortlessly he lifted her up and astride the little mare. Angeni was mesmerized by the look of her cotton and leather-trimmed skirts draped across his muscular forearm.

He stroked her upper thigh. Her body clenched at the touch. "This time we are in my

territory, healer.”

He turned and swung himself onto Nethe’s back.

As Garek grasped the reins, the stallion’s front legs came high off the ground, his wings unfurled in protest of the pressure of the unfamiliar thong bridle. Garek put his hands forward immediately, relaxing his hold. He rubbed the stallion’s neck in reassurance. At his signal, Nethe surged forward and upward.

Bossy males, hmm, Aza? Angeni said as she watched Garek’s sexy back as it followed the stallions’ undulating movement.

The mare pranced about. *Do we fly now, Hippiatra? We must catch them.*

Yes. It appears so, she answered with a happy laugh.

The mare trotted in a circle, her wings flowing out at her sides.

I have not flown with your weight. Hold tight. The mare left the ground in a burst. Angeni relished the upward surge of the powerful little trogon.

I have not lost you.

No. And I appreciate that. Angeni laughed.

Fun? Hippiatra, fun?

Angeni leaned low over Aza’s withers and neck, a signal for more speed. Great fun, Aza. The little mare tossed her head and squealed, doubling the flap of her wings.

Ahead of them the two males, man and trogon, turned to watch them. The two males moved elegantly, as though they danced to music. Two of a kind. Garek’s hair shone as dark as Nethe’s glossy coat, a lock or two fell over his blue eyes. Heavens. Admiring Garek’s regal form, she thought he looked very much in charge of the situation they found themselves in.

As they flew on, Garek twisted around to check on her at intervals. Now he slowed his stallion, allowing her smaller mare to fly along side. Apparently he was satisfied they were safe from a frontal ambush now.

He offered her his hand. She smiled tentatively and took it.

The warhorses adjusted their pace to each other as they continued along as if a hitched team. They traveled on toward the red mountains until they came to a grove of trees and a small lake for watering the animals.

“We’ll stop here for water and rest.” Garek let go of her hand with a lingering squeeze of her fingers.

When Nethe touched down, Garek shifted to the left side and jumped off the warhorse’s back. He removed the blanket. After her own mount landed, Angeni remained on Aza and studied Garek.

He unrolled the thick blanket and placed it on the ground beneath a large sheltering tree with strange over-lapping leaves, greater than the size of a man’s hand.

“This same tree has sheltered Clothoes herding animals for over a hundred years. We will be comfortable to rest here for a while.”

Holding eye contact with Garek, she dismounted. “The water is safe?”

“Yes.”

***Go. Drink.* She communicated to the trogon, as she walked toward Garek.**

At once the animals took to the air again, banking out over the pond, swooping down to splash and play just above the crystal surface, enjoying their freedom, before settling to the bank to drink.

“It’s close enough to walk,” she said, laughing. “They’ll get our supplies wet.”

Garek followed them with his gaze. “Be hell to catch if they decide to take off.”

“Yes, they would. But they will not leave us.”

***Join me.* He indicated the blanket.**

From his expression, he knew he’d surprised her with the mental message.

At her hesitation, he said, *Do I frighten you, Angeni? Does the Challenge cause you uncertainty?* His brow furrowed.

She read puzzlement in his eyes as well as something primitive and powerful, nearly out of control. A chill went through her. To a woman with little experience regarding males, that look was a little worrying.

***Do not be worried. I will see to your security.* There was masculine pride in the words. He broadened his stance and waited for her.**

She wondered if he planned to make love to her here by the water. For a wild moment, her basic instincts urged her to run. She knew he would follow her. Enjoy chasing her. Catching her.

What are you thinking, Angel? What gives you that look?

Far from running, she found herself slowly covering the ground between them, coming to a stop where he stood. When she reached his side, he encircled her wrist with his fingers, smoothing it with his thumb.

It is not too late to change your mind.

Her heart pounded. It was too late for me a year ago, she thought, desperately guarding the thought from him, uncertain he was ready to hear it. Certain she was not ready to say it.

She knew she was safe with him physically.

It was her poor, damaged heart he threatened.

“Did you think this would be the civilized joining of your people?”

She shook her head.

“That our lovemaking would be a polite, mannerly mimic of a dance on a ballroom floor? I offered you a way out. You chose to join me on this adventure. You are mine for now. My wife. The Challenge begins.”

She frowned. “You are a possessive male.”

He closed the remaining inches between them. He bent and touched his lips to hers. He deepened the kiss, then withdrew to gauge her participation. *Can you deny you want this?*

Garek.

She felt bereft at the loss of his warm lips against hers when he took a breath.

Come to me.

“Do I frighten you today?” He lowered his voice to a rough growl, and smiled a dare. His blue eyes blazed.

“I do not frighten easily,” she said, after her pride rose to the challenge. “It is just that I thought ours would be a marriage in name only. For a time....”

Names. You will yell mine in passion. And I will groan yours.

He took the lobe of her ear between his teeth. He held her up when her knees weakened and she slid. “Mmmm,” she moaned. “More,” she demanded.

“The dreams of a woman singing to me in foreign words are coming back to me.” She pressed against his naked chest at his words. “No wonder it seemed so real.”

“It was. Aldorian healing chants my mother taught me.”

“Join me on the ancient marriage blanket,” he invited.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“You still wear your clothes,” he said, pulling her to him and taking her down.

Angeni was mesmerized by the look of him, the raw desire in his flashing eyes. He was magnificently male. So beautiful, lying beneath her now. She was helplessly driven to touch him. She stroked him until his breathing sped.

Angeni.

She loved the feel of his warm breath against her cheek. She leaned into him, yearning

for him to touch her. *Touch me more*, she communicated.

He smiled the smile that always caused a strange ache low in her stomach. His hands sought the bindings of her dress. *My pleasure*. When they fell loose, he lovingly opened the top and pushed it from her shoulders.

“Beautiful.”

He cupped the back of her neck, drawing back to him.

“Closer,” he coaxed.

She leaned in. He smelled glorious, of masculine soap and the clean, primitive clothing. He touched his lips to hers. She wrapped her arms around his neck, which he took as indication she wanted to deepen the kiss. He was so right, she did. She cupped his jaw lines with her palms, enjoying the masculine feel of his beard stubble.

He kissed her, long and so sweet. When he released her mouth, he stilled, his eyes softened as he looked at her. “You’re beautiful. So beautiful.”

His dark fingers contrasted with the paleness of her breasts as they slid over the ridge of her collarbone and down toward the peaks. She closed her eyes in anticipation.

“So soft,” he whispered. “Your body knows you’re mine. Do you see its response? Do you feel it?” He grasped the tip of her breast with nicely callused fingers. They splayed to cup her. She moaned.

“Yes,” she whispered. She could think of nothing but the feel of the rigid flesh of his arousal along her thigh. And her own emptiness that needed filling.

He pulled her tighter to him. “Do you fear me now?”

“Yes, er ... no ... maybe a little.”

He laughed hoarsely, his breath hot and rapid against her neck. “You’re an honest woman, Angel.” *I promise you I will never deliberately hurt you.*

Hold me, Garek, she pleaded helplessly.

Garek gently lowered her to her back. The fur blanket was luxurious and so soft against the feverishly warm skin of her bare spine. He found the hemline of her glove-suede skirt and traveled upward along her inner thigh to the satin undergarment at the apex of her legs.

“Garek,” she gasped, whispering desperately, her fingers kneading his shoulders..

“Oh, sweet heaven, Angeni,” Garek groaned into her shoulder, inhaling the warm fragrance of her. “I want to go slow. Not hurt you.” He slipped his hands under her bottom and lifted her hips against his. “I’m not sure I can slow down, love....” *You have lost some of your fear?*

“I’m disoriented and excited beyond belief. But not fearful. Not now.”

She felt him tremble above her, at her words. A hot shaking took over as her own body and she arched up seeking his power. “Yes, my unease is subsiding,” she said, grinning. “Don’t worry.” She loved him, for now that was all she cared about.

He tugged at her underwear. “This fabric is too frivolous for my fingers,” he groaned.

She helped him remove the offending garment. Then with her fingers, she followed the sculpted muscles of his abdomen lower.

“Slowly, Geni, love.” He breathed the words.

She moved her head back and forth on the velvet blanket. She nipped the flesh of his shoulder. He groaned, apparently understanding her signal to increase the pace. She smiled.

He answered her appeal by brushing her dress up to her waist.

Garek.

Bringing her to him, he sank into her warmth, filling her welcoming channel gloriously. Her fine feminine muscles greedily clasped around him.

“Garek,” she screamed his name, just as he promised she would.

Angel. He answered. “Hold me,” he groaned, closing his eyes and clinching his jaw.

She reveled in the masculine strength moving through her now. Slowly and deeper within her. “Garek,” she pleaded, reaching for the completion that approached, but she instinctively knew would prove illusive without his help. *Love me.*

He seemed to know exactly how to answer her. He drew away. She brought her hands to his muscled backside, and in response, and he surged back into her. She met him in the air above the blankets.

“I should have guessed you would fight for this, too, my love,” he rasped.

She shook her head. *Not fighting.*

He laughed and kissed her more deeply as he retreated and returned, his arousal heavy and powerful.

She caught his mouth with hers, seeking entry.

He answered with a demanding, pillaging kiss.

With soft whispers and breathless moans, she urged him onward. Her fingers roved over every inch of his back and shoulders.

She knew he was driven to prolong her enticement as long as he could. She moved her legs restlessly on his thighs, loving the rasp of his masculine hair, the weight of his large thighs.

Garek, now!

He increased his pace at her words, driving into her fiercely. Suddenly the crashing, pounding waves of completion washed through the aching core of her femininity and radiated through her whole body. She threw back her head in ecstasy. Fine tremors shook her. *Garek!*

She gloried in the harsh groan as he joined her in completion.

Angeni. “Angeni. Angeni”

He spoke her name aloud at the last, the sensual sound of his voice echoed through her body. She smiled happily as languor swept over her. But she felt a twinge in the region

of her heart as she longed for words of love they might have spoken in different circumstances. She closed her eyes.

As his woman fell asleep in the circle of his arms, Garek ground his teeth reliving every moment of the sweet torture of their lovemaking. Her awkward, sweet fingers holding his manhood as she sought his mouth with hers had almost been the early ruin of him. He closed his eyes as if in pain. She moved in her sleep, sensing his thoughts through her slumber. He kissed her forehead and she snuggled closer.

Garek?

I'm here. He thought of how the heart of her femininity accepted him as a glove, cradled him, and held him to her with fierce womanly power.

He took a deep breath, restraining his thoughts or he would surely pull her to him again. If he could manage to hold this woman, he would be the luckiest man alive. Unfortunately, troubling obstacles remained in their path.

* * * *

Angeni awakened from a warm cocoon of sleep to find Garek had covered her with the other blanket. She smiled softly as she watched him sleep.

She could stay here like this forever, in his arms, she thought, resenting that something had woken her. Then she realized what it was.

Nethe and Aza looked off to the eastern horizon, stamping and rearing. Nervous. Their eyes were riveted in the direction from which they had traveled earlier.

Intruders, they warned impatiently, as if they sensed her lack of attention.

She jerked up. *Someone's coming.*

Beside her, Garek came to alertness, his gaze followed hers. He immediately began gathering their clothing. Stepping into his pants, he tossed Angeni her dress, which she quickly put on.

“I’ve learned when you expect trouble, it will come,” he said, resigned. Just then, several one-man floaters topped a distant rise to the east.

“On Aza. Now,” Garek ordered, giving her a leg up. He grabbed the blankets and threw them over Nethe’s back. When on the stallion himself, he said, “If we take the trogon straight over the rock wall there, we just might make it high in the mountains before they catch us.”

Angeni quickly mounted her trogon. “That’s a safety wall. There’s a two-hundred-foot drop on the other side of that rock wall.”

“They fly, Angel.”

She shook her head. “I realize. Not the same. It’s just not the same.”

He searched her face, surprised. “You fear of the cliff is real. Don’t think of it. Don’t look down. No time to argue. Our friends up there are not carrying wedding gifts.”

I realize it’s an irrational fear, but I can’t do this.

He rode close and took her hand. “You stayed with me just now in the lovemaking. You trusted me.” His voice was soft, reassuring. “I know you can go over that cliff. We’ll do this together. Just grab a fist full of Aza’s mane, and hang on.”

Fine. She nodded her permission. **“I’ll do it.”**

“We’ll be safe. Your warhorses won’t be hurt,” he said, sensing part of the root of her fear.

As he said the words, he took Aza’s reins and urged both trogon to gallop toward the cliff’s edge. At the last moment, he let go of her reins and both trogon basculed beautifully over the rock wall and into open air, soaring high over the deep canyon below.

At their riders’ urging, the trogon flew fast, covering as much area as quickly as possible, wings dipping and flowing.

It is a long way down. Angeni sent a mental message.

Stop looking down, Angel, Garek ordered harshly.

She knew he was right. She must not let the animals sense her unease.

Floaters are just seconds behind us.

She risked a quick look behind them. He was right. The narrow profiles of six menacing, black one-man floaters swooped over the rock wall.

Chapter Twenty-Two

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“Lendow, you have more news for me?” The silver-haired man said. Oside’s resigned tone cloaked a low-boiling rage.

“We lost track of the Olandian women, sir,” he admitted.

“The one woman we seek?”

“We know where she is. Keeping tabs on her.”

“Through luck, not skill, I suspect.” The warlord’s eyes were cold.

“We sent a pack of one-man floaters into the mountains of Clothoes to find her.”

Oside rubbed his jaw. “So they’re in no hurry to meet my deadline for the safety of the children. Do we have the children?”

“No. Unfortunately, they were not where they were supposed to be. Said the tall one, the transgen mutant took them away.”

He laughed coldly. “Somehow I am not surprised.”

He continued, “Gone on. What happened with the floaters? Any left operational?”

“They search the mountains as we speak.”

Lendow cleared his throat and took a step backward. “There is something else, sir....” The warlord closed the space between them. Lendow felt the door against his back.

“Yes?”

“The woman ... and Sahnjun rode away on some kind of flying horses. Black. And hard to see. Like they are cloaked with magic.”

A long pause followed his disclosure. The warlord thought it over, frowning.

“By Sasson’s ghost,” Oside finally whispered.

Into the thoughtful silence, Lendow continued, trying to salvage the situation, “Went right over a steep drop to a canyon.”

“They are creatures of the old wars,” the warlord growled. “Extinct. Destroyed by our enemies.” He put a hand to his temple. “Thought to be extinct. And a hippa...what was the word? My grandmother spoke of them and used it often. The word is ancient Earthan. Aha...Hippiatra. The chosen ones who fly with the hippas. The ones they reveal their wings for, fly for and cloak for. Legends mention a telepathic link.” He chopped the air with a hand. “Hmmm. Telepathy is a child’s story. The legends say the bond between animal and rider deepens with the stresses of battle.” He laughed harshly. “If your report proves true, we strengthen our foes with each parry, Lucius.”

Amazed at the warlord’s ready acceptance of flying horses while denying telepathy, Lendow decided keeping quiet at a moment such as this would be to his benefit. His spine crawled with worry that his well-laid plans crumbled before his eyes. He must rush to plan his emergency escape. He would be charged a murderer if caught.

“Could it be the girl and Sahnjun formed an Aldorian mating pair? No. He has diluted blood and she is only a half-blood. Impossible,” the warlord mused.

“Yes, sir.”

“A true, mated pair enhances the symbiosis between the trogon and the hippiatra who guide them. Very powerful combination. Great magic.”

“Yes, sir. Uh, I...” Lendow hesitated, taking another step backward, not following the spin of the conversation.

“See what you can arrange, Lendow.”

“Sir?”

“Think of something. Use the sympathy of the woman and Sahnjun for animals against them.”

“Right. Of course, sir.” Relieved, Lendow nodded.

“And, Lendow—”

He halted with a hand on the door.

“Another failure will be your quota.”

Not asking for clarification, and not caring about the troublesome woman’s true origins, Lendow hastened out of the room.

*** * * ***

Drawing air into their nostrils in gulps, the winded trogon reached the rocks of the foothills as complete darkness closed over the mountains. Under cover of the massive rock formations, their riders closed their fingers lightly on the reins, asking for a slower pace. The trogon settled to the earth, tired and drooping. The whine of the floater engines continued to close distance.

***Well done friends,* Angeni praised them.**

***We are honored to carry you,* Hippiatra, came from the stallion.**

***We will stand guard while you sleep,* Aza offered.**

“The trogon have given you a name.”

“Yes. An ancient word, the root approximates ‘caretaker’, I think. The word in the accent the trogon used reminded her of the chanting prayers her mother taught her.

Garek watched her. “Untie your blanket and wrap it around you as a cloak,” Garek said. “The dark trogon are camouflaged, but that golden hair of yours will reflect whatever moonlight there is tonight.”

The clatter of the trogon’s hooves on the stone echoed around them. Their heaving sides returned to a near normal rhythm as they climbed higher through the crevices in the mountains

“Damn, that was too close,” Garek said. “I can’t believe my stupidity.” He twisted on Nethe’s back to face her. “I couldn’t wait a few more hours to mate with you. I thought I would explode if I waited even a few more minutes. Then like a fool I allowed us to fall asleep. Of all the unthinking stunts. I could have gotten you killed, woman. I could have lost the Challenge before it began.”

She lifted her chin. “‘Mate with’ is a strange choice of words.”

“But accurate.”

“Not the point.” Disappointed and unsure what she’d preferred he say, or hoped he’d say, Angeni shook her head.

“The fact is I made an error in judgment that could’ve cost our lives.”

“Nonsense. The idiots on those evil looking floaters are to blame.”

“For now we keep moving,” Garek said, concentrating on picking a path for them through the rocks. The look of self-disgust still in his expression.

“What? No more mating?”

He jerked his gaze back to her. “You torment me for sport.”

“To make a point.”

“Your point is?”

“That there were two of us on that blanket.”

“I noticed.” He turned his attention back to the darkened path.

They fell silent for a long while as they made their way along the circuitous mountain route.

A long while later she asked, “Garek, what will we eat?” She was hungry, starving.

He stopped Nethe. “We rest a moment. We’ll eat what our ancestors would have eaten. We’re near a lake fed by the mountain streams. When the floaters give up and go away, we’ll do some fishing.”

“For now, if you’re hungry, we have bread and dried foods in our packs.” He took his reins in one hand and tapped the bundle behind him.

She gave him a nod of relief that the small matter of food was solved.

The noise of the floater engines was still echoing around them. Intense light beams on the front of the machines raked circular swaths, ever closer.

“They’ve split up into pairs and are combing the rocks,” he said.

“I’m relieved they’re not blasting the mountainside with laser fire. They must still want us alive.”

“Protecting you from danger during the Challenge has become a lot more than the typical mock effort I’d expected.”

“How do you think they found us so soon?”

“Could be one of the Olandian women is involved.”

“No. I don’t want to believe any one of them betrayed us.” She leaned forward over Aza’s shoulders to help her navigate a rough spot.

“Damned sloppy to assume none of them were involved on the wrong side of this.”

“We should warn Coyle.”

“He’s scheduled to check in with us in the morning. Your brother is an Alliance-trained soldier. He and Hane will be fine.” Garek looked at his new wife as she trustingly followed him along the path. She was so soft on the bridle reins, giving the

delicate little warhorse assistance with balance on the tricky rocks. She was so beautiful and good. Her sweetness overwhelmed him. He would keep her. Somehow.

“Thank you for your reassurance,” she said formally.

He led them higher into the mountains and along the rocky cliff’s edge. A warm breeze blew. He knew the sure-footed trogon had excellent night vision. Their alert ears signaled they sensed the significant drop below them. The smells associated with a living planet—plants, soil, water—were all around them. A good place for families to grow and prosper.

As they approached the ancient dwelling he searched for, they felt the cool air spilling from its mouth.

“A cave?” Angeni noticed an entrance ahead of them on the trail.

“A cavern with a rear exit,” he answered. He hadn’t been sure he’d find the well-concealed cavern in the darkness. As he led the way, the narrow mouth, barely tall enough for trogon and their riders, spread wide to high ceilings inside. Garek tilted his head down to be sure. The soft, sandy surface of the cavern floor depressed under the trogon’s hooves, echoing a soft clop. Along with a cooler temperature, the air had a stillness, different from the breeze along the rock path.

Garek spoke. “Angel, I regret that we will do without the warmth of a fire tonight. Can’t risk it. The mercenaries may be near enough to find it with their sensors.” As Garek dismounted, Nethe shook vigorously to relieve his muscles.

“You will keep me warm.” Angeni stayed on her mare, patting her long neck gently. The mare curved her head around her in a near embrace, wings puffed and flared.

He smiled and watched, amazed once again at the bond she shared with Nethe and Aza.

Dim light reflected by a sliver of moon, illuminated shapes in the cavern around them. He could only imagine what she must think of the place.

She searched the shadows, her expression curious.

If he could build a fire, the cave wall drawings of his people would be illuminated. About the space, the angles of the stone had been long ago rounded and formed. Heavy stones served as chamber dividers. Benches and tables had been chiseled from the

natural formations.

“It feels like a cave, but seems like something different,” she said.

“Different?”

“Reminds me of the inside of a building.”

“As close as the ancestors had. Their homes were like this one.”

“Yes, of course.”

He moved to her and helped her down.

A natural spring bubbled in the center of the room-like space with a pleasant sound.

***Water safe? Hiding place safe?* The tired mare moved to sniff the surface of the pool.**

“Yes,” Garek answered aloud.

Angeni’s eyes flashed to him, wondering, no doubt, if he knew what he’d just done. Hell in space. He’s answered the animal’s thoughts.

***We have served you, Hippiatra? You will remove the saddle and bridle now?* Nethe asked—rather demanded—shaking his head in their direction, a little cranky after the long trek.**

Garek stepped to her, looking up from where he stood below her on the sand floor.

“They grow more adept at communicating with us. From a child-like speech and images to full sentences.”

“Yes.” She frowned. “I don’t know why. Perhaps the bond of battle,” she guessed.

“Do the legends speak of this?”

She waved a hand. “It’s not something I’ve had the chance to study in depth.”

“No books on the topic, I suppose. The Aldorians are not big on books.”

“No. Oral stories only.” Angeni absently lifted Aza’s mane, patting her neck. *You both served us well, indeed. I thank you*, she praised.

Both animals sighed as if in relief and shook again. Great all over body shakes, to unwind their tension.

Garek suddenly found himself envious of the touches and attention she paid them.

“This place is lovely in its way.”

“Its primitive way.” He grinned. “You can better appreciate its uniqueness tomorrow in the full morning light.”

“Yes, I’m sure it is quite unique. Interesting. Even in the bare moonlight, I can tell as much.”

He took her arm and gently coaxed her to him. He bent his head and kissed her, lingering over her sweet lips a moment.

“The bed is to your right,” he said as he drew away, gesturing the way. “Spread the fur blankets. I will settle the trogon.”

With that he moved to leave, leading the trogon on through the rear of the cavern. They followed him with their reins over their necks, no urging needed.

***Yes, my master*, Angeni sassed telepathically.**

He cast a dark look back in her direction.

She smiled, not alarmed at all.

Garek frowned. The woman confused him. Sometimes she appreciated his orders, other times she argued.

He saw to the animals’ safety and food, surprised to find himself happy, humming a strange tune. He stopped short in his tracks, recognizing it as one of her songs. The ones she sang for him as he healed a year ago.

From his location, he could just manage to see Angeni doing as he’d asked, preparing

the skins over a smoothly molded rock bed. Then she lay back, throwing her arms behind her head, testing the comfort of the spot.

She sat up and took her hair out of its binding. Mesmerized, he watched the flowing halo of her golden hair.

Driven, he crossed the distance between them, then dropped to one knee.

Surprised, she turned her face to his.

He closed his fingers around a few strands of her sun-kissed hair. Could not help himself. He allowed it to sift through his fingers.

Her breathing changed.

He rubbed the locks gently between his thumb and his forefinger. It felt like the finest Vandor cloth, other-worldly soft. He captured the nape of her neck and drew her to him. She allowed it.

Beautiful, he whispered into her thoughts. *You're so very beautiful*. In the light of the ancient lamps she'd brought to life just now, it was hard to be sure this was not another of his dreams.

He felt her soft breath on his hand where he touched her hair, then her lips against his fingers. His heart lurched. *Angel*. His groin tightened and throbbed as she kissed his fingers.

"This is far better than a dream," she said.

Had he mentioned the dreams aloud? No. He'd dropped all his mental guards. He sighed. He didn't have the energy to fight her hold on him tonight.

"Reality, thrilling, blood-pounding, and urgent," she whispered seductively.

"You weaken me," he said. He splayed one of his hands at her breasts and felt her heart beating. He sucked in a deep breath.

She shook her head. "Never."

“I will make the lovemaking perfect this time,” he promised.

“It was perfect the first time.”

Angeni observed Garek’s reverence as he touched her. She felt the same force of emotion she’d felt earlier. It surged through her like wildfire, heating her, constricting her throat and nearly stopping her breathing.

She loved the feel of his hand on her breast. She arched to encourage more caresses.

He whispered near her ear, accenting the words with soft kisses, he said, “We’re safe now, love, no one can harm us here.”

Angeni’s hands roamed his chest and back, enjoying the feel of the hard muscle under the suede garment he wore, reassuring herself he really was so close and real.

She would feel the cold of his loss later when she allowed him his freedom. But he was hers for now. And she’d loved him so long; she could not resist relishing this stolen time with him. She helped him to rid himself of his shirt.

“Angel,” he whispered, smiling tolerantly.

She traced the eagle symbol, which had been etched in his belt by an ancient craftsman. With trembling fingers, she found the clasp and released it. When her fingers touched his skin, he drew in a deep breath. She enjoyed his response. Slowly, she pushed the soft suede britches from his hips, loving the smooth tactile pleasure of them. She looked up from her task to see a look of near-painful concentration on his face. Heavens.

Suddenly, Garek wrapped her in his strong arms as if starved for her. She cried out as the bare skin of her breasts touched his chest.

I felt your small cry in my heart, Angeni. It incites me to a level of passion I had not imagined possible. His breathing came in rasped rhythms.

When your soft hands touch me, I could go over the edge of passion, she said.

“Your words honor me, love.” He drew her to him. She allowed her nails to drag with excruciating tenderness across the flesh of his back, adding heat to the flame that caught and swept through them both. He sucked in a rasping breath and moved

against her softness. “Angeni,” he said on a gasp.

She pushed the pants the rest of the way from his hips in a savage move. “You’re greedy, love.” With one hand, he caught her hands and held them above her head. “I want to savor our mating this time. Please?”

Mating, hmm? Daring passionate fire glowed in her eyes.

“Oh, hell.” He said as he covered her body with his. She rained soft kisses all over his neck and shoulders, teeth nipping at intervals. He closed his eyes as if he wished for mercy.

“I cannot hold out much longer.” She demanded with her beckoning hips, and he sank into her in one long stroke.

She sighed with pleasure, opening her legs out wider for him.

He sucked on a harsh breath at the pure pleasure of it. Sharp and intense.

He groaned and succumbed to his release, falling boneless by her side when she followed close behind him.

You still call it only mating?

Sleep now, he said.

She laughed.

“Perhaps my words sound too much like an order?”

Chapter Twenty-Three

The next morning, Angeni awoke, startled by her surroundings. Then she saw Garek looking at her. Those gorgeous blue eyes held the sparks of a banked fire. She looked up at him from her resting place in the curve of his shoulder.

You are just where you belong. “Good morning, my wife.”

Heavens, he smiled that all-too-male smile again. It melted her skeletal structure into mush. She smiled back, shaking her head slightly.

“Angeni, you’re a woman of many gifts,” Garek whispered as his lips covered hers. He kissed her deeply, raising a hand to sift through her hair.

“Thank you. I think.”

“Have I offended you, Angel?”

You speak as if I’m a sex artist.

He laughed. *The designation should not offend you.*

No?

He inspected a strand of her hair. “You learn fast. I thought of you often in the past year. The reality is more than I dreamed.”

Why did you leave me? She shielded the thought from him. It pleased her that he’d wanted to see her again after all. Perhaps he hadn’t longed for her as much as she’d longed for him, but it was something.

“I had many dreams that we finished what we started on that bed the day you left me,” she whispered.

He touched her cheek with the back of his hand. “You held yourself distant, with professional manners until that day. Then you caught fire in my arms.”

“I did?”

“You did.”

“Oh, Garek,” Angeni whispered. “It frightened me when you left Dandrovica too early.”

“Angel, you will give up your participation in the Alliance Cultural Exchange madness.” The change in his tone, from loving to demanding, shocked and annoyed her. “Oh, should I?” She pulled away from him.

He drew away too, hiding his thoughts from her now.

She held out a hand. “You left me behind.”

He was silent.

“Would you have abandoned your commitments for me a year ago?” He washed his hand over his face, then closed his eyes.

“No. Your answer is no,” she answered for him.

He jumped to his feet. “You seek revenge then?”

She stood and stepped toward him with her hand out, horrified he saw it that way.

“We should not make a hasty decision. There must be a way to meet my commitment to the Alliance.”

“I see no way but your marriage to another.” He grasped her shoulders and kissed her, hard and brief. When he drew away he said, “Enough talk. You are mine for now, Angel. It is settled.”

He turned his back to her and gathered some tools.

She planted her hands on her waist, angered by his single-mindedness. *Men.*

The point exactly. Men. I do not care that Olandia sanctions group marriages. I won’t share you with another man.

“I made a commitment earlier, to the Olandian council—I need time to—”

“The council be damned,” he interrupted.

—think of a solution.”

“You are not even Olandian.”

Without another word he strode to the cave entrance and stood with his back to her.

“That was unfair,” she whispered. “True, but unfair...”

Garek to observe her from the distance separating them, then left without another word. Angeni realized she’d cast Garek in the role of her mate in the Alliance’s Cultural Exchange days ago.

She needed time to arrange it with the Olandian council and the ASC. Meanwhile, she wanted Garek’s blind trust and his love. Not his decree and orders.

She put her hands to her temples. She realized she had lost the mental bond with him. *No.*

***You are hurt? Hippiatra?* Nethe answered.**

***We will come to your side,* Aza said.**

She took a steadying breath. *No, no, my friends, I’m fine. There is no threat to my safety.*

“Just my peace of mind,” she said aloud.

Angeni took time to explore her surroundings after Garek left. On a closer look, she saw fine chip marks where the cold stone of the cave had been altered by the ancient humans. The sculpted furniture reminded her of museum quality artwork. So beautiful. The dwelling was more a castle, or a home, than temporary shelter from storms or predators. Colorful and subtle jewels and lesser precious stones were imbedded in the stones. The ancient paintings on the wall amazed her, the colors still vibrant. She followed a scene with her fingertips, careful not to touch.

Every surface of the furnishings had been lovingly formed into beautiful shapes, some were floral, some geometric, some animal, but all with great attention to detail. Garek’s ancestors had cut curving slopes in what must have been their idea head and

neck support. The padding provided by the fleece blanket had saved the stone bed from hardness. A great hearth was the centerpiece of one wall.

An hour later, Garek had returned and roasted a rabbit on a spit in that hearth. Angeni usually did not eat more meat than was necessary to maintain her health, but the smell was very appealing today. “Garek—” she began, only to be cut off by abrupt words. “Uh ... shouldn’t you dress in, er, more than that loin cloth thing?” she asked. What happened to the man she had shocked by tying up her skirt in front of him on Olandia?

“Who else is going to see me? The rules of civilization no longer apply in these mountains.” He was still angry and frustrated with her, every nuance of his posture proclaimed the fact.

He’d become a primitive hunter. She smiled at him, challenging him.

“Your eyes are like those of a defending lioness. I need a damned whip and a chair.”

“I don’t think so,” she dared in a firm voice.

He laughed at her sass. “You’re hard to stay angry with, lady.”

The buzz of the earcom interrupted. Larger than the discreet com-link Garek had used before, it sat on a stone table.

“Yes?” Garek replied.

“You two all right?” Coyle asked.

“Fine. Had visitors last night though. A pack of six floaters. Military armoring. No more noise from them since the early morning.”

“How could they find you?”

“Could be one of the women gave information to Warrick. And he passed on our location. See what you can find out.”

“Right. This changes things.”

“Yes, it does.” Garek looked to Angeni.

“Right.” Garek silenced the earcom.

“Coyle’s voice was very distant. It sounded very like it does from the slingship in transit,” Angeni commented with a questioning suspicion in her tone.

Garek leapt to his feet. “Damn it to a thousand hells, you’re not telepathic, you have preternatural hearing.”

“As a matter of fact, I have a theory about that. Infrasonic waves, translated from brain waves might be what I pick up.” After a thoughtful pause, she continued, “The external structure of my ears is a bit unusual. Perhaps the inner mechanisms are odd as well.” She narrowed her eyes. “You’re evading my question. Was my brother leaving Clothoes?”

He didn’t answer.

She marched over to where he stood by the hearth, not daunted his imposing size or even his loincloth.

“You do not need to know.”

“Oh. No.” She guessed. “Garek, you tricked me. Tell me you and Coyle are not in the process of sending an Alliance Guardswoman to Olandia to impersonate me.” She paused, allowing her angry brain to process the words. “Call him and tell him to turn the PRAX around.”

“No,” Garek said, his tone flat and final. Yet his eyes were strangely pleading. “I’m the leader in this place, love. What I say, is what we do.”

“Hah! Well, excuse me.” She placed her hands at her hips. “I did not know who I was dealing with then. I thought you were still the warm, considerate man I slept with last night. A partner. Not a dictator.”

He held up a hand to stop her words. “Geni,” he voiced the shortened version of her name with a touch of pleading—only a small touch.

The fire in her eyes was a raging flame. Garek felt himself staring helplessly for a long moment. His hands were planted on her hips again, her posture determined.

“Com him.”

“No,” he said again, making his tone even harder this time. “The rules of the Challenge do not permit us to make contact with the outside world. The Challenge would be forfeit. We know the children are safe with Hane for now.”

She sighed. “Coyle can call in, but we can’t call out ... I see. Perfect sense in that.”

“It’s difficult to align old customs with new tech. Some gray areas.” He reached for her and loosely folded her stiff and resistant form in his arms.

With a small sigh, she allowed her body to mold to his.

“That’s it, sweetheart. Stop fighting me. We work better as a team.” He sifted his fingers through her silken hair, grasping a gentle handful and tilting her face upward.

“So far, it has been you who forgets that fact,” she said.

He smoothed her cheek, and then gave her a quick kiss on the lips. “Angel, we already know you can take care of yourself.”

“I know you can keep me safe as well,” she said.

“I have to prove it to my people.”

“Come with me, wife.” The flash of anger between them had created a need to reaffirm their closeness. Garek led her to the bed, their meal forgotten for the moment.

“I will help you burn away some of that sparkling passion, my love.”

Garek jerked in startled reaction, as she reached out to stroke his manhood, to cup him.

She smiled at him. “I realize I am lacking in subtlety. I’m unpracticed in the preliminaries.”

“I’m sure your can judge from my reactions, your instincts are good. Very good.” He winced as she continued to touch him.

“A man could lose his mind with those kinds of forward leaps in practice, love”

“Oh, Garek, the feel of you ... I can’t describe it. You’re satin and stone at the same time.”

“Yes, love. Our wants are the same.” He lifted her to him with tender firmness. She gasped as he surged into her, answering her need. Laughing with joy, she gloried in their loving.

Garek smiled with masculine satisfaction. He loved to see the look in her eyes when she was completely his. Last night he had been too wild for complete, lucid awareness.

“I love the sounds you make,” he whispered. “The deep in your throat, feline sounds. Those are a bonus, something I had not known a man could expect.”

She smiled, secretively. “I’m glad I please you.”

He kissed her neck. “Last night, I was too out of control to be sure,” he told her. “I thought you were with me. Now I know.”

“Yes, I was. I am with you, very much with you.”

He prolonged their sweet agony as long as he could bare it. Then surrendered to the force of the powerful waves of release. She joined him in fulfillment immediately, calling his name.

“Garek.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

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On the second morning of the Challenge, Garek and Angeni left the cavern in the cliff.

They planned to bathe in the mountain waterfall that fed the small lake at the mouth of a canyon.

Garek stood by in amused silence as she explored the beautiful spot, a dream place, all crystal water and sparkling sunlight. She turned to him.

“You look as though you invented this waterfall yourself.”

“Just for you, Angeni, mine,” he said with indulgent humor. “I have another surprise for you.” He held up a small oval bar of soap.

“Soap?” she questioned, reaching for it with greedy fingers. She lifted it to her nose as soon as he released it. Perfumed soap. Jasmine. “This delicate soap was around three thousand years ago?”

He said nothing.

“Oh, my Saints, you cheated,” she guessed. “You risked the Challenge, the successful completion of the Challenge for a beauty bar.”

He shrugged. “Women like these things. Even angel warriors, correct?”

She laughed with joy. “Yes, they most certainly do.” She narrowed her eyes. “I’m sure it fits the spirit of the ritual. Your thoughtfulness pleases me.”

She quickly removed her clothing and dropped them to a nearby rock. Taking her small treasure with her, she stepped under the water. Garek settled to the ground by her clothes and watched. She found her eyes were drawn back to his compelling gaze often. She could only do minimal justice to her shower with his eyes following her, scanning her body and heating her blood.

When she finished, she carefully rewrapped the soap in its leather covering. With that done, she bent to where he sat and rewarded his thoughtfulness with a long kiss. He pulled her into his arms and tugged her down to him.

“Talk to me,” she whispered close to his ear. “Tell me what happened after you walked away from Dandrovica? Why did you betray our bond?”

“Geni, love, I failed to see the bond as you did. For that I’m deeply sorry.”

“That’s a start. All of it. I want to know everything. I must decide if I will forgive you.”

He groaned in protest. “Witch. Talk. Talk, is another thing women are fond of.” He leaned back putting his hands behind his head. “What do you want to know?”

“Discussing your personal life does not come easy?” she asked.

“You will have to be more specific in your questions.”

“That means some things you will not offer freely.”

“Yes.”

“When ... when you left the med ship—”

“I had to leave.”

“Tell me. Please.”

Damn, damn, damn.

She grinned at hearing swearing in his thoughts.

“With your eyes pleading for me to stay, it was the hardest choice of my life.”

Angeni felt selfish that she needed to go over all this. But she really wanted to understand.

After a long, long pause, he seemed to force himself to speak. “When I reached the age year of marriage, as oldest Jonason, the Jona arranged a marriage for me.”

“Your grandmother, your leader, arranged the fiancée for you?” Her anger boiled now, close to the surface. She almost liked it better when she’d believed he loved the other woman.

He looked away. “She was from an equally strong clan. Very prestigious coup for the Jona.”

“Was she pretty?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Her looks were irrelevant. But, yes, in her way, Illana is a beautiful woman.” He laughed. “In the way of ice hanging from a roof in winter.”

“Go on,” she invited. God of the Founders, she should not feel so threatened by the other woman.

He laughed again, “A part of my heart enjoys the jealous look on your face, my angel.”

Embarrassed, she looked away. “I do not find this matter at all humorous.”

He took her chin with his hand, asking her to face him again.

“We went through the ceremony of words.”

Angeni stiffened and drew herself away and up tall. “The same ceremony you and I went through on board your ship? She was your wife to that degree?”

He drew a hand through his hair, clearly reluctant to say so. “Yes. The same ceremony. But not the same at all. We did not spend a night together. Illana declined to remove the implant. The marriage ended before it began.”

The relief flooding her was as irrational as her earlier jealousy.

He gave her a self-deprecating smile. “The Ritual was over. And I admit I was relieved.”

“What happened?”

“Illana told the Jona’s council that she preferred my brother.”

She gasped. “Part of the something more personal you mentioned that came between you and Rehne.”

“Yes,” he answered. “The only way out for her was to declare I’d failed to impress her.” He waved a hand. “Said I had not gained her trust and confidence. She requested my brother as forfeit.”

“Selfish, selfish girl,” she said.

He gave her a serious grin and another shrug. She'd bet he struggled hard to keep his thoughts from her, which angered her, but at the same time she wished she'd been there to offer him comfort.

"It no longer matters."

"Why did this Illana woman not just say she wanted your brother in the first place? Why go through with all that?"

"That's the way you would have handled it, is it not? You would have stormed into the Jona council and told them you wanted another man."

"Yes, I would have," she said.

He kissed her forehead. "It would have shamed her clan. Doing that and facing the costs of it all would have taken more courage than she possessed, my angel warrior." He shook his head. "You would not understand such cowardice."

"Hrmph." His full smile was back. Distracted by its masculine beauty, she forgot the silly Illana.

She kissed his throat, then asked, "Garek, do you believe in love at first sight?"

She had not meant to say that. Not so abruptly. Not so soon. But it was out now and she looked at her fingers, waiting anxiously for his answer, unsure what to do with her hands. What could he say?

"No, Angeni, I do not," he answered, his voice so soft it hurt to hear it. "I'm not sure I believe in the man-and-woman kind of love at all. Attraction. Attachment, yes."

"Like my attachment to the warhorses?"

I believe in the commitment and loyalty of the marriage bond. Absolutely." He stilled her hands by covering them with his own. "Two people see the good and accept the bad over time."

She pulled her hands back. "Yes. You believe in ownership, possession, but not love?" She whispered the words with her heart aching.

"Love sure as hell had nothing to do with Illana's wanting my brother. Perhaps she

saw him as an easier man to manipulate.”

His answer was certainly not what Angeni hoped to hear.

She resented that he’d compare her, and the bond she knew they shared, to the selfish former fiancée.

To hide her disappointment and pain, she turned with haste to the task of gathering her clothing and dressing.

She’d been talking about herself and Garek, not the unknown Illana and his brother. She would not clarify it for him. She’d asked him about the woman, after all. She’d directed the conversation. He thought she had the courage of an Aldorian warrior coursing through her blood. If she had such courage, it did not extend to matters of love.

As Garek watched, Angeni fumbled, and snatched up her scattered clothing. She was so quiet, subdued, but beautiful all the same, in her feminine outrage and ruffled feathers. He’d noticed a glimmer of moisture in her pretty eyes as she turned away. It hurt him to see her tears. He sifted some sand between his fingers as he observed her. She confused him.

Did she think less of him because another woman rejected him?

A native Clothoes woman would. He didn’t know how to ask her.

He did not want to influence her with the fact that Clothoes males were allowed only two tries at marriage. And this was his last chance.

*** * * ***

The next morning, Angeni sat by the lake, watching as Garek fished, magnificent in his near-nude state, with only the scrap of cloth covering his groin. His dark hair was ruffled by the breeze. Standing spread-legged, knee-deep in the water, his concentration focused on his task. He waited and watched for the next fish. He used no tools. To her astonishment, he’d already caught one fish with his hands.

He’d given her a broad, teasing smile and explained his learning of the ancient skill. “There is little for a teen boy to do without the distraction of teen girls, so the elder

Clothes men taught us to fish.”

The lake began as a narrow stream, which grew larger, forming a teardrop-shaped lake cradled by high canyon walls on three sides, carex rushes grew along the curves of the water, their grass-like leaves elegantly bunched. Angeni could see Nethe and Aza grazing in contentment in the distance.

Suddenly, the stallion shied sideways. He thrust his magnificent head up, his tail flagged and he trotted a small circle. His nostrils flared as he snorted and sniffed the air. Then he reared high, bolted into a gallop, and burst high in the air, turning to face the direction of the danger, heading back toward Garek and Angeni all the while.

Her pulse racing, Angeni stood to her feet. “Nethe is terrified,” she said. “No telepathic message fully forming from him.” She sensed only his stark fear. Suddenly, she received an image from his mind. “A clawing beast on his back. A big cat.” Now the little mare caught Nethe’s terror and launched herself into the air from a foursquare standstill.

“Garek, something’s wrong, very wrong!”

Seconds later, the unmistakable sound of a large cat echoed against the ridges around them, a tremendous growling roar.

“One of the exotic cats has escaped.” Garek waded from the water in huge, splashing strides and stepped in front of Angeni as if to protect her. He grabbed his breeches and stuck his legs into them. His eyes scanned the canyon floor around them. Then he took a quick look to the sky.

Following his eyes, she gasped. They were there, above them in the distance, the black floaters, idling in hover above the rim of the canyon walls, seven men astride them.

Angeni felt a cold sweat. Her heart began a heavy thud. Garek tried again to shove her behind him.

“They should not have found us so soon. Go! Hide behind the falls,” Garek ordered.

She hesitated to do as he said. She could not leave him. “What are you going to do, Garek?”

“Have to stop the damned cat before it gets to you. Bastards have tortured him or

pumped drugs into him.”

He grabbed her shoulders, hard. “Go into the waterfall. Now, Angeni.”

She shook his hands off and backed toward the falls, compelled by the urgency in his voice.

Garek started toward Nethe at a run, he grabbed mane and launched himself up on the trogon’s back, then galloped toward the floaters as they began to drop altitude.

“I need a weapon,” Angeni said. “The bow.” She could get the Challenge Ritual bow from the cave. Make their enemy earn the kill. She headed for the cave entrance instead of the waterfall.

Once inside, she found the ancient weapon standing against the hearthstone where Garek had left it. Her hands closed around the polished wood, and the weight of it felt right in her hands.

In seconds, she ran back out of the cave and raced in the direction Garek had taken. He had only a knife at his waist, little help against a wild cat.

She noticed a storm rolled in, darkening the sky. It seemed to storm once a day in these mountains, beautiful crashing light shows.

As she neared the clearing, Aza came running to her. A few meters away, she saw Garek. He and Nethe had reached the cat, a beautiful white tiger. He dismounted and crouched down, talking in soothing, quiet tones to the agitated animal. The tiger’s sharp cries of rage and pain filled the air around them. Nethe looked wary.

The desperate look in the poor cat’s eyes increased Angeni’s already rapid pulse. Glorious in its fierce way, with unusually long fur and stark white teeth, it limped back and forth in front of Garek and Nethe.

“Angeni, what are you doing here?”

She saw the abrasions with blood-soaked clumps of fur hanging from them on the cat.

“What happened to him? Can we help him?” She tried to whisper, but the words came out as a hoarse croak.

“They must have half-dragged it here. No need to induce anger with chemicals, the tiger is out of his mind with pain and fear.”

“Yes.”

The floaters closed in. Angeni lifted the bow and spread its leather thong with a sharp stone- tipped arrow, aiming at the threatening cat. Her heart ached at what she considered.

***Wait.* “Give me a few more minutes before you shoot.” His tone carried the same mesmerizing smoothness as before, but a firm command was unmistakable.**

“The floaters watch us like carrion birds.”

Garek held up a warning hand. “I should have known you would not hide.” *Take Nethe and Aza and get back to the cave.*

Garek, I cannot leave you here to face this alone.

Garek glanced over his shoulder and laughed a fatalistic laugh. “A waste of energy trying to reason with you. We’ll discuss the matter later.”

She tilted her chin proudly, expressing her feelings at his tone.

“If you will not run, then follow my lead.”

“Fine,” she agreed.

Garek looked to the sky. “Damned hard for a man to protect his mate—ancient ritual or not—if she will not stay put in the cave he provided.”

She watched the floaters creeping closer, surrounding them in a circle formation.

“I will not stand back anymore than I would run for my life. I can’t believe you would ask it of me. I’ve said I will stay with you.” Her words carried her pain and betrayal.

“No. I suppose not.” The cat sank to the ground and growled, ears flattened to his skull, teeth showing. Garek softened his tone again as he realized his voice had lost its soothing quality.

“I guess you’ll have your way, Healer. Too late to run, they are in weapon range now.”
His gaze turned back to the floaters. Hers followed. The machines solidified their circular formation, just a meter off the ground now.

In full battle stance, Nethe and Aza were calm now, resigned to put up a fight rather than flee. Side-by-side, wings fully extended, they stood, tossing their heads up and down in warning, large black eyes angry and fierce.

We await your command, Hippiatra, Nethe offered, snorting loudly.

Angeni’s eyes riveted to a man with silver-black hair and Coyle Oside’s face. Coyle’s father, the Aldorian warlord, Chahl Oside. More lines etched his face. This man lived with a certain amount of daily stress. And she saw the illness there, the pallor of his skin. The result of an oxygen-starved heart. Without medical help, he would have little time. He stared at her, his brilliant gaze unwavering.

The floater on his left side carried a blonde man with a pale, sparse mustache. This one had the greedy, desperate eyes of a mad man, a cornered man out of chances. She felt a shiver of dread course through her at the sight of him.

And he was Olandian. She knew it.

Angeni’s hands tightened on the bow. Oside and the pale man were dressed in civilian garments. The other men were dressed in an assortment of old military clothing. None in Alliance colors.

To Chahl Oside’s right, a huge man sat astride his floater. Various robotic parts made him more machine than human. His severe, hawk-like features caused her to think of great hunting birds, the kind that ruled the night.

Angeni heard all of Garek’s thoughts now. He was not filtering. He’d guessed it could be an advantage for them. He’d gone rigid with the force and flow of adrenaline. Every muscle in his body contracted. Stiff.

It’s worse than I guessed, Angel. Better hired guns this time.

“You’re usually more particular about the side you fly for, Macaluso,” Garek addressed the bioengineered man. Garek’s even tone betrayed none of his turmoil.

Oside looked to each of his men, appearing less confident after Garek’s words. Angeni noticed he hid it fast. No doubt, he had not counted on Garek knowing the mercenary on his right side.

We will survive this, he communicated to Angeni. *Both of us. There will not be the heroic sacrifice you consider at this moment*, he warned her.

Mac leaned back on his floater and folded his arms. “Sahnjun, it’s been a long time since we fought together, side-by-side as green young men.”

“You should have stayed with the Alliance.”

“Not in some office. Not for me.”

“Why are you here?”

“Just helping the man here reclaim his step-daughter from the renegade Clothoes savage.”

Mac grinned at the last.

“Seemed simple enough. My guess is he neglected to mention a few pertinent details. You the savage he mentioned?”

“Yes. No doubt, he failed to inform you that the lady is my wife.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

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“A wife is to be protected,” Macaluso nodded in respect.

“A man who drags an animal across the rocks would not have many more scruples in his dealings with humans,” Garek said.

Mac acknowledged his statement with a sharp nod. “I assure you it was not on my order.”

Garek’s eyes turned to Oside. “Too bad you didn’t hire Mac for the job of sabotaging the commercial slingship, Oside. Could have saved those security men their lives. And saved you money in the end.”

“True, Sahnjun. An expensive endeavor I’ve undertaken here. A lot at stake.” He shifted his attention to Angeni. “You’ve been quite illusive, girl.”

“What do you want from me?” she demanded.

“You chose to ignore my invitation to join me on your home world. Put down that weapon so we can talk. Those old bows are fast and deadly.”

She did not lower her weapon.

“You owe me,” his voice grated, angrier. He squeezed the throttle of his floater, keeping it aloft. “You owe me your father’s debt. He took my woman. You must pay the obligations of your mother and father.” He emphasized the words by smacking his chest with a closed fist.

“I owe you nothing. Leave this place now, while you still can.”

He laughed roughly. “You mistake my meaning. Yes, I think you will do, woman. Brave. By the gods, like a full-blooded Aldorian female. Your mother would be proud.” He laughed again, the sound not entirely sane.

“Do not speak of my mother.”

His laughter soured. “I abducted your mother from an ancient and proud clan. Indeed, you will be a useful asset for me.” He looked pleased. “I’m thinking these days of holding my empire together after my death, you see.”

Garek spoke, “She will play no part in your schemes, Oside.”

“You will take your half-brother’s place. An honor.”

“To join your organization is no honor,” Garek argued. The big cat snarled and whipped its tail in agitation.

Osido shrugged. “I need her as a bargaining tool.”

Macaluso spoke, “Osido, I think it’s time we escort you and your friend, Mr. Lendow safely away from this place. The woman is debating which one to shoot between the eyes, me or the berserker cat.”

The big cat held its crouched position in the center of the circle, growling and hissing, but growing weaker.

The other men laughed at the idea of the girl using the primitive bow, but the serious expression on Macaluso’s stony face made them realize their error of judgment. At his hand signal, his men reversed their floaters, pulling back and upward, awaiting further orders. “And Sahnjun is considering throwing the cat into the belly engine of my floater,” he continued. “The only thing you can think of, eh, my friend?”

“Now you’re a mind reader. I’d hate like hell to do it.”

Mac smiled grimly and tipped his head. “Osido, I’ll give you my professional evaluation. The woman is not being held under duress. In fact, she’s well protected. Our contract is void.”

Osido’s eyes flashed with anger. “All the same, you must remember my deadline, girl. The time of your muto children runs short.”

“They are guarded well. I will stay here.”

“Only a matter of time until I find them.”

“You bluff, Osido,” she said simply.

Osido’s gaze shifted to Garek. “You have done well to gain such loyalty from a woman with Aldorian blood.”

“If by some chance you get past Hane and harm those children, there will be no place in the Alliance and beyond you can hide,” Garek warned.

Osider reversed his floater toward Mac and his men. “We leave now, Lucius.” He spoke to the desperate looking Olandian.

But Lendow held his spot.

Angeni watched in horror as the traitor pulled a small weapon from his jacket and aimed at her. Not enough time to move.

Garek yelled, “No!” He dove toward her, shoving her hard. Simultaneously, she heard the weapon fire and saw blood dampen Garek’s leg at his bad knee.

Even pushed aside and to her knees by Garek’s shove, Angeni did not lower the bow. Adrenaline thundered through her veins.

She fired into the belly engine of Lendow’s floater. The machine groaned and screamed. With its largest and primary navigational engine damaged, it veered and lunged wildly. Lendow leapt from the crashing machine, landing half-running, half-stumbling.

Placing another arrow in the bow, Angeni sighted Lendow just as Mac swooped down and Lendow grabbed onto the back of Mac’s floater. They shot up and out of range.

She looked to Garek and the big cat.

With one hand, Garek massaged the tranq implant he’d told her all the exotic animals carried, spreading the release of any medication left there. The cat was nearly unconscious allowing him to do so. With the other hand he held pressure on his own knee.

Going to him, Angeni whispered, “Oh, Garek.” She ripped a leather thong from the arrow quiver. His knee was torn and bleeding. She tied the cord above his injury to stop the flow of blood.

“Your pain tolerance is as strong as your sense of responsibility for others, animals and humans,” she fussed.

Angeni took Garek’s communication device. “I must hail the slingship.”

“No.” Regret covered his face as he shook his head. “The Challenge Ritual will end.”

“I know. I know. But you will live. PRAX ship AC-9280,” she called.

“I failed to make you my wife,” he whispered.

The familiar, ““Osie here,”” came from the small device dimmed only some by the distance.

“Coyle get us out of here. Garek is hurt.”

“Be there as soon as I can. Twenty minutes.”

“To make it that fast, he must’ve been on his way back,” Garek observed.

“Yes.”

“Have to subdue the cat. Can’t let him hurt you.”

Angeni dropped the bow from her hand.

“There’s a downed tree over there,” he said. “Go. Gather branches. We need some kind of makeshift—”

“Garek, you must be still and stop expending your strength with directions for me.”

“—cage. We can use the canyon wall and the rock outcropping for two, maybe three sides, if we choose the right spot. The wood doesn’t have to be large in diameter, bring anything you can carry or drag.” With long sweeping motions he rubbed the large cat.

He gasped air into his lungs as the waves of pain began to assault him.

Angeni hurt for him.

She threw up her hands in defeat. “Alright, alright, I’ll get the branches, but first I want you to lie down and get your leg above your heart.”

“I’ll see to it you rest and take care of that knee this time,” she promised.

“Yes, I’m sure you will.”

She hesitated.

“Go. The cat is quiet. The bleeding has slowed. Nethe will help me guard him.”

Soon she had the cat as confined as possible under the circumstances. The fencing was crude, woven from tree branches and vines, and propped in the stone. Angeni did as much of the work as possible, to force Garek to save his strength. The tired cat, still stunned and nervous, rested now.

“It’s a damned shame,” Garek said. “Poor devil’s in pain.”

“He’s not the only one. We will reward him for not eating us with a good home,” she said.

Nethe and Aza eyed the whole process warily and from a distance, wings still out.

“At least he’s alive,” she said.

“At least we’re all alive,” Garek said, turning his head so that his eyes met hers. “Come here, my angel. Let me hold you. I need to know you’re really all right. That fool, Lendow planned to kill you.”

Angeni did as he asked, sinking to her knees on the rain dampened grass, moving into his arms, careful to avoid bumping his knee joint.

The robotic components saved him from bleeding out.

She stayed in his arms as long as she dared, before pulling gently away. It was time to loosen his tourniquet. Each time she did so, she pressed both hands to the femoral artery just enough to slow the flow. She was tense and shaky. She relied on rote skills. He was so pale, his skin cold and moist. The early stages of shock, poor capillary fill, pulse slow, erratic....

“I thought Macaluso the greatest threat.” She rubbed her brow with the back of her hand.

“A good call.”

“Not good enough.”

“Lendow behaved irrationally. Hard to predict. Mac will not bother us again. But we have not seen the last of Oside and the Olandian traitor.”

You read me well, Garek, she communicated telepathically, meaning his knowledge of her reliving what she could have done better.

Yes, I do. It's this magical, mind-speaking thing. He tried to smile. I admit it was exciting knowing all your thoughts as we faced those men. Removed uncertainty. Hell of a battle advantage. The Aldorians will want this skill back.

“Yes, unfortunately, they will. We must keep it secret from them. Rest now,” she ordered. She pressed a kiss to his forehead and smoothed back his hair.

Through the telepathic link, Angeni felt pain slash through him in throbbing waves as his natural endorphins faded. She closed her eyes and tried with all that was in her to block some of his pain psychically. To share it. She felt an energy drain. He seemed to calm. Maybe she had some skills as a natural healer after all. She was grateful.

“Would've been a shame to kill Mac,” Garek mumbled.

“You would have killed him too?”

“Yes. To protect you,” he said without hesitation. “But it would have been hard to live with afterward.”

His head fell to her shoulder, and she stroked his brow. She checked his pulse.

Garek tried to make a comment and stopped on a rasping breath.

“You must rest,” she urged.

“Talk to me. Mind words or aloud. Helps the pain. Somehow.”

You believe Macaluso took no part in angering the cat?

No. Disgusted him. Saw it in his eyes. Not Oside's style of operation either. He's—a white-collar criminal. Most of the time, doesn't even have to go outside the law. Too fastidious

for the kind of vulgarity it took to drag the cat. Lendow's twisted plan, I bet, the malicious bastard."

But kidnapping is fine with Oside?

Cleaner, More his style.

"Lendow is Olandian. He made a promise to heal," she whispered.

"How do you know Lendow is from Olandia?"

"I've seen him somewhere. At one of my father's parties, perhaps. I've also heard the name before. In the subway tunnel on Olandia, the mercenaries said Lendow promised to pay them the bounty for your life."

"I see," his voice weakened now.

"You must not fight so hard to stay awake."

"Have to. For you." *Sing to me again, Angel.*

She did as he asked. Her voice softly singing the chant, filled the air around them. Before she'd finished and could begin another, the PRAX slingship's shuttle dropped over the canyon rim.

Coyle is here.

Tell him ... tell him ... everything. Garek allowed himself to slip into unconsciousness at last. Angeni felt the full weight of his head fall to her lap.

Chapter Twenty-Six

During surgery in Garek's PRAX ship, Angeni successfully repaired Garek's knee a second time in just over a year.

Fatigued and drained, she would have wished for another healer, but if she'd hesitated, he would have lost the limb altogether.

Garek had insisted on sending help for the wounded cat before he submitted to the surgery. The poor animal was being cared for at the quarantine station's veterinary facility.

She touched his shoulder. He stirred. "How are you?" she whispered, but he did not answer.

The ship sliced through space at maximum hyperspeed. There was urgency. Hane had not checked in for hours.

"The children are missing, my love. I need you," she said quietly. They were in the ship's infirmary. Rehne had just left. The younger brother seemed as worried as any good sibling. Coyle manned the slingship's helm.

Garek opened his beautiful, thick-lashed blue eyes, reminding her of the first time she saw him. *Angel?*

***Yes*, she answered him telepathically.**

The children? Hane?

"No word from him."

"There might be some explanation. He's good," he spoke aloud, his voice weak but audible.

"Yes." In a very chilled corner of her heart Angeni feared the children would become a part of Chahl Oside's plan after all.

Coyle feared it too. He hadn't said anything. He didn't have to say anything. She felt it from the sibling bond they shared.

She also felt his small spark of renewed disappointment in his father, the realization that Chahl Oside was capable of even deeper evil than he had known. ‘We will not turn you over to him, sister,’ he’d sworn to her.

As she looked down at Garek from the side of his recovery surround, suddenly, the ship lurched. A disturbing jerk to the senses occurred at the same moment. Angeni grabbed hold of the table frame upon which the surround rested.

“Coyle, what’s going on?” She spoke into the ship’s com-link.

“Just a large chaotic loop. Been pushing the speed. It’s over for now. We’re ahead of it. How are things back there? You still working?”

“No.”

“Good. Is Garek all right? Did the ship’s lurch harm him?”

“Only a bit of disorientation from the disruption. Garek is unharmed.”

Garek lay on the infirmary bed. His mind seemed to be healing faster than his body. He needed to be in the bridge working out the details of their next move. He was damn tired of defensive strategies. He wanted on the other end of this. He flexed his legs. Damn restraints. Why did healers feel the need to tie a man up all the time? *Angeni?*

If he could just get water, maybe he could get his vocal cords to function. He hadn’t felt like this since the morning after he stopped in at a port bar on Rhodia several years ago.

***I’m here.* Angeni moved from the window. Almost immediately, he came fully conscious.**

“Saints, anyone else would be out for hours yet,” she said. “You are fighting the sedation.” Angeni was watchful as he moved restlessly in the confines of the sleek med surround monitoring his status.

Get me out of these damned straps, he demanded. We need to plan.

She moved immediately to do as he asked.

Where are we, Angel?

In the PRAX, above Olandia. “I was just looking out the window. My home that has never really been my home,” she said this with a sad smile.

He reached up with his freed hand and touched her cheek.

“Our orbit is routine and peaceful, awaiting a port slot,” she continued.

“Peace is good for a change,” he whispered.

Garek tried to cut through a post-anesthetic haze. She watched him as he moved restlessly in the confines of the sleek med equipment, which monitored his status and insides.

“Get me to the bridge, Prime Healer.”

“Don’t call me Prime Healer like that.” But her smile took the bite from the words.

* * * *

“You wanted the cat to kill them, didn’t you Lendow?” Chahl Oside demanded, forcing a calm tone. He had not gained his considerable power and status by allowing his temper to burn out of control. Dammit, the Olandian bastard could cost him everything. All he had built over the years.

“Of course not, sir. The squirming thing slipped. It almost took my floater down. My skill level with those things is not as high as yours is, sir, I’m afraid.”

“You wanted the girl dead and you set out to make it happen. You’re being paid to sabotage my plans.” He stepped closer, menacing. “Who bought you, Lendow?”

“No one. I assure you. My loyalty is yours.”

“I paid you more than you earned in ten years.”

“Of course, sir. And you have my appreciation. I only wanted to help.”

“My truce with my enemy must be cemented. The girl is my property, Lendow. No one

will be allowed to stop me.”

“No, sir.”

“When my step-daughter matebonds with Samaras, the new Triad leader, my influence will be solidified. Enough influence to gain complete control before my death. The three-warlord pyramid offers the only hope to avoid the strong arm of the Alliance.”

“Yes, sir.”

“All the old easy ways to gain wealth will be abolished. Can’t let it happen. I may even jockey my province into position to retake one of the triad leadership spots,” he said. “Possibly one or both of the current seconds are interfering, I’ll wager. Who else could it be? Speak to me. Say which one hired you.”

“You are mistaken, Oside, I swear it.”

“No? You have been trying to arrange the girl’s death every step of the way. You’re getting desperate now. Your failures filter back to your secondary employer? He can’t be too impressed.”

“I have not failed.”

“Go back to the mining colony, Lendow. You are of no use to me. I will provide an escort.”

“You can’t do this!” The man surged forward.

Oside summoned his guards.

They stepped in and forcibly removed the Olandian. Lendow left kicking and cursing. Oside turned back to his window to contemplate the peaceful desert of Olandia below him.

*** * * ***

In the cockpit of the PRAX, Coyle discussed plans for the next move in finding the children and taking them to their new home on Clothoes. Garek, at Angeni’s insistence, sat with his leg immobile and supported on a chair arm. Angeni stood by his side. They

still wore the clothing of the Challenge Ritual. The contrast to the high-tech cockpit was amazing.

Not taking his eyes from the console, Coyle said, “We’ll go in as though nothing unusual has happened. First priorities to make sure you’ve been removed from the most wanted lists.”

“I appreciate it,” Garek agreed with sarcastic humor. Angeni and Coyle claimed to need his input, but seemed to have everything worked out and under way.

He watched her. She was a beautiful woman, but more, there was a peace about her that soothed him.

That peaceful quality was slipping right now. In a quiet corner of her mind, she worked through the reality of her imminent return to Olandia. She was the one who had lived in caves. An existence of pretence and shadows. Understanding the choices her mother made had not made years of secrecy more bearable.

Garek looked down at primitive clothing. He enjoyed the feel of them, the smooth brush of the material. He’d always be the man of these clothes. Perhaps he always had been less than the civilized man he’d thought himself to be.

You are civilized, she insisted telepathically.

I do not feel so.

It was a heady feeling to play the part of the primitive man, to know that I fulfilled my woman. That part of him would be forever changed, deepened, only temporarily sated.

Her eyes sparked as she read his thoughts. Her cheeks flushed. *Garek, don’t...*

He laughed. Coyle stared at them puzzled.

“I know, don’t tell me. You’re speaking with your minds.”

“Right,” Garek admitted.

“Glad my bloody mind-filters are working today,” Coyle said, laughing.

“Will we get back to Clothoes soon?” she asked, changing the subject, seeking Garek’s eyes with her gaze.

“Yes,” he answered simply. His sweet Aldorian warrior queen needed his encouragement just as she had when they’d flown out over the canyon rim on the trogon.

This mission should be simple by heroic standards. Safely rescue eight or so children of various ages and various physical disabilities. And one big, gray-skinned, Muscovan bodyguard. No problem, sweetheart. No problem at all for the primitive male. For now, he settled for a try at a reassuring smile.

He wouldn’t like to face her pain in the event he couldn’t avert the disaster lurking crouched ahead of them, as treacherously as that godforsaken tiger on Clothoes.

“How is the ship holding up, Coyle?” Garek asked, as much to deflect his own thoughts, as a real need to know.

“Better than predicted.”

“Your brother mentioned an article for the Alliance’s Journal of Engineering out of this,” Angeni said to Garek.

“No one has risked this many continuous runs in the new PRAX before,” he agreed. “Coyle shouldn’t have.”

“There was much at stake,” Coyle said. “Well worth the minimal risk.”

“The same stakes as on Gandos?” Garek demanded. He’d bided his time to get back to this question.

Coyle looked over his shoulder. “Yes.”

“What are you two hiding from me?” Angeni demanded.

“That my coming into your emergency room was no coincidence, Geni. The Alliance came to Gandos to protect you from Aldorian warlords in the neighborhood.”

“Is that true, Coyle?” she asked, turning to her brother.

“Yes, dammit,” he said. He dragged a hand through his hair.

“You should have contacted me first,” she whispered.

“No need for you to know the warlords sought Aldorian females. And that they knew you were one of them.”

“I needed to know. I needed to know about you. You will have to give up this protection by deception when you find your mate,” she snapped.

Coyle changed the subject. “We’ll line up another slingship on Olandia. Turn this one over to maintenance.”

“Good idea,” Garek agreed with a sharp nod. He would like to handle the details of the overhaul himself. But he and Angeni needed to be visible. Bait for the trap they were setting to catch Chahl Oside. “You can handle that while we attend the reception Angeni’s father is planning for us as a bonded couple.”

***Men.* She sent telepathically, disdain for their switch in subject laced through her tone.**

Garek smiled. She was not happy with her brother.

For some time, you have known warlords pursued me, Garek? You might have told me as well. How will we be rid of them?

We will find a way.

“When you line up a new ship, go over it with scanners,” Garek said to Coyle. “We don’t need a bomb on board.”

Coyle faced him and nodded. “We’ll maintain secrecy about which port we claim, until the last possible moment.”

Garek assessed the other man now. Coyle’s motives had proved clean in all this, a brother protecting his sister. He could not deny his relief. Their lives had been on the line before, in their Guard days. But Angeni’s had not.

She stared out the slingship’s arrow shaped cockpit windows with absorbed fascination. As he looked on, perhaps she sensed his gaze, her expression became one of

grim determination. Her stubborn streak reactivated.

“What will be our part in all this? Will we look for the children or wait till we are contacted?” she asked.

“We’ll try to reestablish communication with Hane when we’re on the ground. He may be in hiding, unwilling to risk sending. If we hear nothing, we’ll see if he’s turned up anywhere.”

“Dead, you mean?” Angeni asked.

“Yes. There can only be one or two explanations for his failure to report,” Garek answered, his voice grim.

“The first?”

“That they’re close to finding him. That Hane is using his fighting savvy, hiding out, staying on the move with the children. To decrease the odds they are found by our enemy.”

“Garek’s right, Angeni. Hane’s smart.”

*** * * ***

The garden behind her father’s home was a beautiful place, artificially cultivated to formal elegance, topiary hedges and miniature florals, all well kept. A collection of downsized trees and shrubs graced the east wall, creating the illusion of more space than actually existed there.

Chancellor Traek’s friends and colleagues milled about, congratulating Angeni and Garek on their new bond. The Olandians’ surprise, and—in a few cases—thinly shrouded distaste for the offworlder among them, was obvious.

Warrick dared to attend the celebration, strutting about.

The man appears confident for one who should be worried his schemes unravel around him.

Angeni touched Garek’s arm.

True.

Garek's voice in her mind reassured her. Tonight, he wore the sexy formal black and white Clothoes wedding clothing from the ship. And she the beautiful rose colored dress.

She wished this could be a normal wedding celebration with nothing more to face than their future, and the family they would have together. If only he'd returned to her on his own. She would have known he loved her.

But there were other children to think of at the moment.

"Looks like we're about to find out what has cheered Warrick up," Garek whispered.

"Good evening to you, Angeni. Er, Sahnjun," Warrick said, clearly begrudging the need to include Garek in his formal greeting.

"What's on your mind, Warrick?" Garek demanded, ignoring the civilities.

Angeni tightened her hand on his arm.

Warrick looked momentarily taken aback, a memory of his confrontation with Garek and the outcome reflected in his expression. She smiled as she also remembered.

"Yes, uh, I merely find it necessary to inform your bondmate the funding for her therapy classes has been terminated," he pressed on.

Angeni gasped before she caught herself. Garek patted her fingers reassuringly.

"Council regs require the director of the program be in residence, I'm afraid," Warrick said. He did not try to keep the triumph from his voice. "No one stepped forward to replace you."

"I suppose you reminded them of the technicality, Warrick?" Angeni asked. "Even discouraged my replacement?"

He waved a dismissing hand in the air. "Who reminded them of their obligations is irrelevant. You must remove those little mutants from the hospital grounds as soon as possible, as your underground facilities are to be taken over for inventory storage for

the waterworks crews. No one seems to know where the children are at the moment. Inexcusable.”

“We’re here for the children, Healer Warrick, and I think you know the situation exactly,” Angeni said, hinting at his involvement.

Garek squeezed her arm again, this time bondmate shorthand for, ‘enough’. *Easy, Angel. We do not want to tip him off.*

She nodded in agreement.

“Angeni, you must see by now you have made a mistake in going with this, this man.”

Garek looked down on Warrick menacingly. “You will be damned lucky if you end up working on a floater pallet on Dandrovica when the Alliance has dealt with you,” Garek said, taking a step toward the man, his posture threatening.

Angeni curled her fingers a bit more tightly around his inner elbow. He stopped short and looked down at her small fingers. *I thought we were not going to tip him off?*

He goes too far.

“Yes, Froton,” Angeni began, speaking softly to diffuse the situation now. “We are here for the children, as well as to visit with my father and my step-mother. The funding really makes very little difference.”

“You realize, Prime Healer Traek, you are forfeiting not only your funding but most of your rights of Olandian citizenship as well? The same applies to any children you and this Clothoes barbarian mutant may have.”

Angeni tried to hang on to her temper. “Actually,” she began, “the natural mutation that occurs on Clothoes and other colonies about the Alliance is more the norm.”

“I see you are lost to us,” Warrick spat.

“We do not know what changes the future holds,” Angeni replied calmly.

“This debate assumes your offspring survive the primitive childbirth process,” Warrick continued. His narrow-eyed gaze measured Angeni’s reaction.

“What are you trying to say, Warrick?” she asked with a resigned sigh. Word battles were a specialty of Warrick’s. At the best of times, he could be vague. Destructive insinuation and implication were underhanded talents of his, which he used against even his friends.

“Curiosity about your case has led me to do a bit of research. As you know, the communities where high-tech uterine replicators are prohibited, or not yet in use, report a much higher infant mortality rate.”

“Of course,” she agreed.

“I’m sure your new husband explained all aspects of the current temporary ban to you.” He waited for impact of his words.

Angeni looked to Garek. He looked stunned.

Angeni.

“There are also rare cases of maternal death as well,” Warrick continued, with the malicious gleam in his eyes. In fact, considering what I’ve learned, I’ve encouraged the Council to prohibit any more participation in The Cultural Exchange altogether.”

***I could enjoy killing this vindictive, poisonous little bastard.* Garek communicated.**

“You will want to void this marriage bond immediately, I’m sure,” Warrick stated. “By Clothoes law, it is your choice. That is my advice to you, Angeni. I’m sure the Olandian Council could a release for you within a few days. I’ll speak to legal counsel on your behalf.” He puffed out his chest a bit, enjoying his role as benevolent advisor.

“There will be no release,” Garek stated flatly before Angeni spoke.

“Of course not,” she agreed, looking into Garek’s eyes.

Froton Warrick cleared his throat for attention.

“If you will excuse us, Healer Warrick, my husband and I must visit with my father’s other guests. We have others to speak with before retiring. We are newly wed. You understand.” Angeni flexed her knuckles; they’d grown stiff from the tense pressure of Garek’s bicep. She led a reluctant Garek away from Warrick.

“Well, he enjoyed his revelation, didn’t he?” Angeni asked as they put distance between themselves and Warrick.

“He did.” Garek looked at her strangely, sadly resigned.

“The slimy, slimy swamp worm. I should have let you kill him. I should have asked you to kill him. I should have begged you to kill him!” She allowed her temper rein now that they were past the true danger of confrontation between the two men.

I may yet, if you like, my angel.

She smiled at that. Angeni did not know what Warrick’s revelation meant to their fragile new marriage bond. Had Garek never meant to have children with her? And, therefore, the information she’d just learned was irrelevant. “When were you planning to tell me about this replicator issue, Garek?”

The noise of the celebration continued around them.

“Or were you?”

His eyes were serious. “I meant to tell you,” he admitted. “You are not required by Clothoes law to have my children.” *Therefore, the Alliance suspension of replicator use is of no concern to you, no threat to your health.*

I may already be pregnant.

Garek’s gaze jerked from his surroundings to her eyes. He stopped and turned to face her squarely. She saw and felt that her mind-words had torn like a jagged blade through him.

“Damn, I assumed you’d taken measures to prevent pregnancy this early in our union. My fault. Never make assumptions. A critical Guard training tenant,” he said, looking very angry with himself.

“No, no, I did not... use anything,” she whispered.

“Are you telling me the Jona did not cover birth control in your Challenge preparations?” A frown darkened his expression.

“Not a word. I’m a grown woman. It was my responsibility. I should have prepared myself.”

“No, it was her duty to give you the methods sanctioned by The Ritual. I thought she did.”

“But wasn’t a child her primary motive in pushing you into marriage?” she said with a tolerant sigh. “The Jona desperately wants a successor.”

He put a hand on his forehead. “Yes. Damn it to a flyer’s cold hell. I begin to see how desperately.”

“I imagine she fought this uterine replicator ban tooth and nail?” Angeni asked.

“Tooth and nail,” he confirmed, his frown deepened. “She still fights it.”

Angeni was stunned, numb. The significance of the problem began to settle into her mind and heart.

Her dreams of a family had always had a time-honored, boxy uterine replicator in them. And frequent early visits after the embryo had been transplanted to watch the baby grow and develop. She’d expected many sleepless nights staying with the replicator, watching the baby near the end of its term. But this. No. This was unusual, unexpected.

“Are there many babies lost? Did he speak the truth?” she asked in a quiet, serious voice. She knew the answer, but she hoped.

“Warrick exaggerates. He tried to frighten you, manipulate you. There are problems, yes. The natural birth process can’t compete with the efficiency and safety of the replicators for the mother. The child, however, is marginally better off with the natural process. Most couples in the district are waiting out the ban. That was the Alliance Science Commission’s goal, slowing the growth of the population.”

“I thought Clothoes was not densely populated?” she asked.

“It is not. Too many wars. But the majority of the colonies that surround her are.”

Angeni wondered if she would have the courage to have a child without a uterine replicator. If she was already pregnant, the choice was taken from her.

As he observed his lady's reaction, Garek was scared stiff. He searched her expression closely for disgust, distaste, or anger. His ability to hear the woman's thoughts failed him badly now, when he needed it most.

Damn, he should've guessed the measures his grandmother would take. He could think of no solutions. Angeni could be pregnant now. His heart surged with joy. But the thought of Angeni in the painful struggle of childbirth held fear for him. Perhaps an exception to the ban could be made. He would see to it right away. The timing of transfer was critical. It might already be too late.

She offered her small hand. He looked at it for a long time, then took it.

Her stepmother's voice came to them. "Angeni, child, I saw you become upset after Healer Warrick spoke with you?" DeAndra and Saxton met them mid way across the room. "What happened? Is it more Alliance business we can not yet know the details of?"

DeAndra was a sweet woman and a fine Olandian scientist in her own right. Angeni smiled and kissed her cheek. DeAndra had a healthy curiosity and might relish a retelling of the adventure later, when they were free to share it with her. "I'm afraid your perception of events is correct." Angeni said.

"Yes, we could not help but see you are disturbed, my dear, and come to you at once," her father said. He looked at Garek as if gauging his guilt in the situation.

"This is not Garek's fault, Father."

Her parent relaxed and smiled. "I will take your word for it."

"Thank you, sir," Garek offered.

"Angeni, I realize Garek brought you back to us safely. DeAndra and I will not forget that fact," he said. "But—"

DeAndra nodded her agreement. "Yes, our gratitude is boundless. But, your father is trying to say you always have a home with us." She patted Angeni's hand.

Saxton continued, "It is not everyday I relinquish my daughter to another man in

marriage. Angeni has explained to us that you are in a trial phase as far as your people are concerned. We wish you the best.”

Garek inclined his head in a brief salute.

Her father slapped Garek on the back in comradery. “I will see to it Warrick is asked to leave the celebration at once.” He lifted a hand to summon security.

Garek put a hand on her father’s arm. “Chancellor, we cannot afford the luxury, as satisfying as that action would be,” Garek said. “Warrick is a suspect in the Alliance investigation of recent matters.”

“Hell in space you say?” The chancellor clenched his fists. He looked thoughtful. “It does not surprise me Warrick is involved. A sound assumption, given his behavior in the past.” His eyes flashed. “The idea an Olandian citizen sabotaged The Cultural Exchange makes me furious. Warrick is a lazy man. Laziness often leads to a man’s downfall.”

“We have been so concerned he would blackmail our Angeni into marriage, Garek,” DeAndra said. She waved a delicate hand. “Using her mother’s secrets against her. He is a terrible, terrible man and the way he looks down upon the little ones in Angeni’s programs is inexcusable.”

“Yes, inexcusable,” Garek agreed.

“Did not bode well for future father material. Indeed, we worried, but did not think he dared this degree of betrayal of Olandia.”

“We are indeed relieved to be hosting you tonight, Garek, rather than Warrick,” DeAndra said with a smile.

“Thank you,” Garek offered politely, unsure what to say.

The evening continued as though Garek’s world had not been hit by another ground rift by the revelation of the Alliance ban on uterine replicators.

As the time passed, well-wishers came forward and retreated in a steady flow. The Chancellor and his wife stood close for the remainder of the celebration, on guard against anyone else upsetting Angeni.

Garek wished the thing over so he could have Angeni to himself a while. At least she had not stormed out on him.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

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That night, Angeni and Garek shared the guest quarters in her father's home. Garek shifted again for the thousandth time. The bed was too damned soft after the firm supportive stone beds on Clothoes, but that wasn't the only thing keeping him awake.

Angeni slept soundly. She sought contact with him by pressing her silken feet against his leg. He smiled. Tonight's lovemaking replayed in his thoughts. She moved him more than he'd ever dreamed.

He left the bed and dressed in all black. His movements were silent and economical, but she sensed them. *Garek?* "What is it? Can't sleep?" she asked, blinking her eyes.

"No, but do not let me disturb yours."

Angeni forced her sleepy eyes to focus on her husband's dark outline, his obviously fully clothed outline.

"Wait. I'm going with you." She threw back the blankets.

"No, dammit, you are not."

She was already in her shoes. "Where are we going?" Curiosity and excitement flooded her being.

Garek framed her face with his hands. "I'm going to see if I can find some answers.

Starting at Coyle's guesthouse. When I dropped down to Olandia the first time, he mentioned an old-style shuttle in the skyport. Instead, I found a brand new model with some after-market military options, exactly like the one that followed us the first day. That alone makes the Blackford Hall the logical place to start looking for those answers."

She continued dressing, determined, and hoping he would not put up a strong argument. He was exasperated, but with a hand raked with masculine helplessness through his handsome hair, Garek relented. *Hell. All right. Come with me.*

Resigned, he waited for her to finish dressing.

*** * * ***

An hour later, Lendow led three men cloaked in black onto the guestroom's patio. They had attacked and disabled the Olandian security guards posted nearby. At his signal, one of the others broke the lock on the glass terrace doors. They found the room previously occupied by the newly bonded couple empty.

The hair on the back of his neck stood and he ground his teeth. "Why would they not be here, asleep like normal humans?"

On the bed table was a belt with the eagle symbol of Clothoes inscribed on it. His anger rose. In frustration, he picked up the formal belt and threw it violently across the room. This was becoming more than a job of work for the money. It was now about the need to win.

"Search the place!" He calmed himself, seeking to hide from his men the fact that his carefully executed plans had gone awry once again.

*** * * ***

This time the key plate Coyle gave him did not work.

"The lock has been changed since my first visit," Garek said. He glanced back to Angeni, who stood right behind him, using a high-tech, Alliance issued tool he finessed his way past the lock mechanism and into the skyport of Blackford Hall. As he led the way through the darkness, Angeni followed closely, watching and listening for trouble.

"You scan the surroundings with more natural efficiency than most Alliance guards

I've worked with."

"I am Aldorian, it seems," she said, with a smile in her tone.

"I've noticed."

"Something is definitely not right here."

"They came back to cover their tracks, hmm? Put things back in place as Coyle would expect them?"

"It would appear so," he agreed, folding the little tool and putting it back in his pocket.

As the door swooshed fully open, they found a disc flyer. Its once bright red hull tiles were now faded and chipped. The small, round machine sat slightly askew on its support foundation.

"So, there is an old-style flyer in here. I suppose they thought it wise to return it after I borrowed their modern model," Garek said.

Angeni touched the old flyer's red-painted side reverently. "Beautiful. It's an XK-Hummingbird Commuter."

"It's a classic."

"I had one just like it."

"Damn," Garek growled as he came to stand under the open lift door, located center on in the rounded saucer. She was lost in looking over the old machine. In his mind, he could see her as she'd been then. "A young warrior angel among the pacifists, the healers, a blossoming bird of prey among the geese," he said.

"I flew high enough not threaten other air traffic," Angeni assured him.

"High and fast, I'll wager."

She made no denial, fingering the control panel now.

Garek folded himself through the small door. "Your father should have bought you a

safer machine. Can you activate the flyer's computer?" She was already sitting in the cockpit, checking its systems.

"Sure," she answered with casual confidence, not looking up from her task. "Two short flights, very recently. Nothing more. Not in a long time."

"Are there any house security code records in there?" He leaned in close for a better look. Tight cockpit. The curving walls closed in on him some. Angeni seemed not to notice the tightness of the space.

"Most of these old flyers were too easy to access to leave that kind of information in the ship's computer," she explained, but checked. "No, nothing."

"Figures. That would make our work too easy. We'll have to crack the house security system and get inside."

"We could bring in an official investigation team from Father's security people. Or the Alliance."

"No. Not yet. My guess is it wouldn't do any good. The bad guys will get wind of it and clear everything off their computers. Maybe they already have."

"I suppose you're right."

He stepped away from the saucer. "Geni, climb out of there and let's get started."

She smiled, distracted. She was reluctant to leave the old flyer, but did as he asked.

With ease, Garek got them through Blackford Hall's security system and into the house without a sound. The invisible mesh-field had been a surprise and a challenge, but he had breached it with time and patience.

Minutes later, they located and gained access to the mansion's computer system. Angeni guarded the door of the opulent office as Garek sat behind the desk.

"Someone's been using this place as a base of operations, all right. Illegal biogenetics research data. That's damned ironic."

"Who?" Her voice was urgent, and angry. "We must find out who has been behind this evil."

“I don’t know yet. Just invoice codes from the central hospital complex here on Olandia. I’m getting closer to a name.”

“What is involved?”

“The main revenue is transgens. Olandian healers are dealing in stolen genetic tech and services.”

“No.” Angeni forgot her post and started toward the computer to see for herself.

He moved his chair back so she could read.

“The Muscovan project? It can’t have been Olandians behind that horrible work,” she insisted.

He knew she saw the evidence in front of her. She sat abruptly in the nearest floater chair. He would protect her from this pain if he had the power.

“The Alliance has suspected Olandian involvement for years. But no proof,” he said. “Who better than a healer to oversee the science of it?”

“To find our technologies being used for unethical purposes, for financial gain, is repugnant. To produce slave labor...soldiers...harming the children.”

As he watched her, Angeni scanned the numbers on the screen. Terminology of the trade, with the unmistakable signs of monetary transactions in neighboring columns.

On a heavy, trembling sigh, she spoke again, “They were confident of secrecy, over-confident. The flocking flesh traders. They’ve not put much effort into brushing away their tracks”

He grinned at her use of the worst of Aldorian swear words. “Right. It’s all there.” He stroked her shoulder, trying to sooth her. And to offer comfort in her pain and anger at the depths of man’s greed.

She faced him straight on. “Garek, can you send this information to the Alliance? These people must be stopped. Now. They could be starting human cultures somewhere already...”

Garek recognized the growing rage in her tone.

“Yes, my angel warrior, I can contact the Alliance from here. We’ll stop them.”

“We’ve made such progress for the good, using the same science. We can’t let this go on any longer.”

“May never stop it all,” he felt compelled to warn.

“We have to do what we can.”

He placed his hand on hers as it rested on the corner of the desk.

Yes. We will stop them, Angel.

She nodded, acknowledging his telepathic message.

After a few more minutes of silent perusal of the information, Garek swore in disgust.

“What is it?” she asked, having taken up a post by the door again.

“The sabotaged ship. Looks like the ladies of The Cultural Exchange weren’t the only cargo scheduled to leave Olandia that day,” he said thoughtfully.

“What do you mean?”

“We have two different things going on here. Lendow’s name is beginning to turn up often. Has himself knee-deep in a conflict of interest. Seems he was paid to stop his own shipment.”

“He meant to blow it up early?”

“I believe he did. The documentation is clear. Didn’t give a damn about blowing up his hired hands and the security men with it.”

“He’s insane then.”

“Yes.”

“Was he the healer involved in selling genetics?”

“One of them.”

“There are others?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“There are three names here. Warrick.”

“Of course. That does not surprise me at all.

One of them is yours, Geni. He’d used the mental pathway, hating the idea of speaking the fact aloud into the room.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

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Angeni was shocked. “My name? My name is there? I would never be involved in this.”

“These records make it look as though you’re up to your pretty behind.”

Angeni’s heart pounded now. She watched him, took a step toward him. Could he believe this of her?

She inhaled deeply. She should be more concerned with what the Alliance authorities involved would believe than what her lover thought of her. She wasn’t. She realized in a blinding moment of revelation that without this man’s love, trust, and respect, she

would have little else of value.

A sound from outside interrupted. The drone of a descending shuttle. The noise from its reverse engines vibrated the windows—much too close for standard safety. A window overlooking the small garden beyond the office popped and flexed before crashing to the floor. Garden debris flew about.

Three armed men, dressed in military garb, jumped down from the craft before it stopped and ran toward the building. As the shuttle came to a full halt, Lucius Lendow exited the machine.

“Out the back,” Angeni said, drawing her weapon. “We might make it to the old disc.”

“It might be damned smarter to stand and fight than try to fly that thing,” Garek answered but grasped Angeni by the hand and, with his longer strides, half-dragged her toward the flyer.

As they broke through the door of the skyport, they saw the men following them out through the back of the house, weapons drawn.

“They knew we were here. Had to.”

“Yes,” she nodded, breathing hard from the sprint.

Quickly, Angeni threw herself into the pilot seat, slipping her hands into the neuro-link gloves. No question of the things fitting Garek’s larger hands.

Covering her hand with his, he sank into the seat beside her.

“This thing is old, Angel. The neuro-interface may not be a good match to you.”

“It will be. It has to be, or they will capture us. I am not ready to take a second husband,” she said, referring to the Triad leader Oside schemed for her to wed.

“Technically, it might be your third commitment in all this. If you include the ASC’s Cultural Exchange.”

She glared at him. “Funny.”

He grasped her chin as she began strapping on her headgear. “Promise me, if you begin to feel pain or confused, disoriented, you will pull out of the link and land this thing.”

“Promise.”

With only a token protest or two, the old bird sputtered, and then rumbled to life. Angeni piloted it to a perfect hover immediately.

Hell in space, you are gifted, Angel.

She rewarded him with a smile.

As they started their spiral spin, up and out of the port shield cone, they heard the engines of the enemy’s shuttle firing to life outside.

After clearing the port roof’s opening in no time, Angeni drove the small flyer straight upward steep and fast, leaving the newer shuttle far below.

As they leveled off into a marked, night skyway channel, the lighted guide strips cascaded behind them.

The faster shuttle covered the distance between them rapidly.

A red light flashed on the pilot’s console. “Warning, warning.” The computer’s words were inside her mind, not unlike the telepathy. It had taken only seconds to begin hearing the machine perfectly. “You are being targeted. Take evasive action now. Adjust left,” the old computer suggested.

Garek stiffened by her side and she guessed he could hear the computer’s voice as well, through his telepathic link to her.

Angeni veered left. A beam of intense light and near-blinding fire passed them on the right.

“Zoni,” he said.

The enemy tried to gain a better vantage point for targeting the brightly colored old machine. Angeni knew time was running out, they could not evade the faster machine long.

“They’ll fire again. Soon.” Garek stated in a deadly calm tone.

Angeni dropped altitude abruptly, ending up under the shuttle and low enough to the arid brown earth to see it with the old flyer’s onboard lights. In a maneuver from her teens, she spun the saucer around a power grid, throttling it forward on the other side in a surge of speed. The newer shuttle fired, blazing the spot they’d just vacated.

Within moments, the shuttle compensated, flying too low, and fired upon them again. The computer’s voice articulated, “The third engine of your Hummingbird is on fire. Isolating nav control to the other two.”

“Take measures to seal damaged section,” Angeni ordered.

“Recommend ejection of pilot and passenger cubicle immediately,” the voice returned.

Angeni found the appropriate controls and initiated the orders the machine suggested.

“Eject mechanisms malfunctioning,” came from the voice.

A crisp swear word came from Garek. “Can you keep us flying much longer?”

She glanced in his direction. “I’m losing responsiveness. A water reservoir is near here. I’ll ditch the Hummingbird there. Hang on.”

He slashed a smile for her. *You can do it.*

He had every confidence she could crash land the darn thing safely.

Maybe she could. She smiled back.

You can.

Just knowing he thought so, propelled her confidence level upward. “With the neuro-link, my night vision is better than anything installed in the new shuttle,” she said, hoping she was right, hoping she wasn’t too rusty with the link.

You’re fine. Steady. Just a bit longer.

His words added to her concentration, helped her focus on controlling the old machine, drain what power it had left in it.

They dipped over a small ridge. The reservoir came into sight. The other shuttle was flying full speed right in their back pocket. With a last burst of reckless forward speed, Angeni let the Hummingbird drop, front edge first to the water. Its shape was naturally water friendly, so the flyer could float. At the last possible margin of safety, she altered attitude to just kiss the surface of the water, barely avoiding hard impact.

The enemy pilot failed to see the earthen dam looming in front of him, until it was too late. The newer shuttle crashed against the dam and exploded into flames and flying deplex composite fragments like breaking crystal.

“That was beautiful flying, my angel.” Garek carefully pulled her hands out of the gloves. His heart jerked back to life. He wanted her detached quickly and out of the old disc before it sank to the bottom of the lake.

*** * * ***

After answering questions about the high-speed air chase and unauthorized fouling of the water reservoir with a machine, Angeni and Garek were back in their guestroom at the Chancellor’s home.

During the questioning, Garek had carefully skirted the incriminating evidence they’d found on Angeni in the computer files, for which she was grateful.

“Do you believe the evidence against me?” Angeni looked out the windows of their bedroom now, without seeing the stark landscape beyond the rear terrace.

Garek came to her and placed his large hands on her shoulders. He turned her to face him, his hands warm and flexing on her skin.

“No, of course I do not. I should be angry with you for asking. Considering the day you’ve had, I’ll display some husbandly understanding.”

She searched his expression. No hint of suspicion or caution clouded his eyes tonight. Just the warmth of trust. Relief washed over her. She threw her arms around his neck and held him tightly.

“You will give up The Cultural Exchange nonsense, Angeni,” he rasped against her

temple where his lips rested.

The stark order took her by surprise. So much for husbandly understanding.

She stiffened and took a half-step back.

Again? You ask me this again?

Garek raked a restless hand through his hair. *I should not have brought it up.* “Not spoken with such a cold demand.”

“I won’t let you control me any more than I would seek to control you.”

His blue eyes darkened, and his eyes narrowed. “I can control your body, lady,” the words seemed forced through clenched teeth.

Angeni gasped. “Yes, you can. I cannot deny the truth of that arrogant statement.”

He lifted a hand in plea, as though realizing he’d gone too far. *Men.*

“That would not solve the issue at hand, would it?” Angeni knew she should be angry with him for trying to use his sensual pull in this argument. And she was. “We need to talk this out once and for all. I realize you have no use for The Exchange.”

“Later. We will talk later.” He lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bed.

His breath came hot against her cheek. “Tell me you want to be with me. Tell me you want me.”

“Yes. I want you, Garek. So much,” she answered into his mouth, helplessly. She closed her eyes and allowed her body to show him.

Garek groaned. Tonight, she wore a garment from The Challenge Ritual, soft, red silk this time, the soft fabric sensual against her heated skin. Aching, he covered her mouth with his, found his clan crest, the eagle symbol, at the hem with his hand, and began a slow journey upward.

This kiss was full of all they’d been through earlier in the day. The all encompassing joy of making it through together safely.

He strapped a possessive leg about her upper thigh and said, “Tell me that no other man will ever have you.”

“I want no other man.”

Her legs tangled with his, moving restlessly, pressing closer in silent demand for his attentions.

He answered her request immediately, powerfully, pinning her beneath him and entering her in one long stroke.

“That’s all I need, my love,” he rasped.

“I need you,” she whispered.

He smothered her words with kisses and playful tongue, moving to lick the hollow of her ear.

With their loving, they were communicating deeper than any words aloud or in thoughts could achieve.

She moaned her pleasure and arched to meet him, encouraging him, holding him to her, trapping him with her legs.

He broke the kisses to laugh.

“I want all of you,” she demanded, her voice throaty and low.

He increased the pace, until she cried out with the joy of it.

He joined her in the echoing release a light-second later.

“Get some sleep,” he ordered.

“You enjoy giving me orders,” she said, exhausted. If she were not so tired, she’d stay awake just to let him know he wouldn’t always win with her. Not as completely as he had tonight. Her eyes blinked back open. She noticed he was putting back on the black pants again.

“Are you going somewhere?” She stirred a bit to ask, realizing he planned to leave her behind again for her own good.

“No, I’m not going anywhere. I intend to stay awake awhile.”

“You expect more visitors tonight?” She spoke of the intruders to their room while they were out. The broken Clothoes belt was clear evidence.

“A real possibility. We’ve seen too much incriminating evidence today? Rest while you can.”

“All right,” she answered, falling asleep as she spoke. Piloting the old flyer had taken a toll. She’d felt a draining sadness when the machine sank into the dark water, as if it really had been a part of her. Maybe the officials had been right to ban production of the neuro-link vehicles. Too many unknowns in the human brain, she thought as she allowed slumber to take her. She felt secure and safe with Garek guarding while she sought healing sleep.

Garek sat awake for several hours in a position that allowed him to see the terrace and the interior doorway. The place crawled with Alliance Guard, having taken over the duties of the injured men from Olandian security. Still.

As the minutes slowly ticked away, he combated the need to sleep himself by sorting through his problem with Angeni. He wanted her to abandon The Cultural Exchange for him. He could not consider their marriage safe until she did so. The felt the uncertainty of her commitment, the division of her loyalty. As if she waited for something.

He found he wanted it all. In spite of denouncing love, he found he badly wanted an old-fashioned, primitive declaration of everlasting love from his wife. He’d wished for it right in the middle of making love tonight. He dwelled on the fantasy a while now.

Minutes later, hearing sounds from the terrace beyond the window, Garek came out of his chair. The unmistakable soft pad of stealthy footsteps sounded. The snap of a twig blown in by a storm earlier. A sleeping man would not have heard. Garek flexed his palm about the small laser weapon.

Where were the damned Alliance guards? Why no alarms? They’d expected an inside job...so he and Coyle had brought in an army.

He crept to the bed where Angeni lay peacefully. He placed his mouth over hers, pressing his lips to hers. It seemed a sure enough way to wake her without causing movement or sound. This, they hadn't taught him in Alliance Security training.

Wake up, my angel.

When her eyes flew open, he forced himself to release her sweet mouth. He motioned for her to follow him.

Quiet.

As they rolled from the bed, Garek searched for Angeni's dress. He tossed the sexy thing to her. Obediently, sleepily, she quickly squirmed into it.

Intruders. Garek led her out the door and down the hall to an empty bedroom. So little time. He hated trying this with her along. No choice. The bedrooms shared the terrace garden. We'll go around, get behind them.

With that quickly and quietly accomplished, Angeni clasped to his side, Garek called out with deadly menace, "Drop your weapons."

The clink of deplex dropping to the ground quickly followed Garek's order.

There were four of them dressed in dark clothing, some covering draping their heads.

"Planning a little surprise, Warrick?" Garek demanded. He didn't know for sure it was Froton Warrick. He could not be sure. Guard intuition. Someone who could get by the guards with official looking papers. His guess proved accurate when Warrick's familiar voice echoed in the silence of the evening.

"Yes, Sahnjun. It would seem I failed. You watched for us, I take it?" Warrick asked, unable to completely hide the startled fear in his voice.

"I had some suspicions. With Lendow dead in the shuttle crash, I thought you'd show your hand sooner or later."

Warrick laughed darkly. "Lucius Lendow is a slippery individual. I would not count him dead before seeing his remains in the morgue, were I you."

Garek nodded in acknowledgement. “We agree on something at last.”

“What are you doing here, Warrick?” Angeni demanded.

“All in good time, my dear. Be patient. But that is not a virtue you can claim, is it?” He smiled hatefully.

“I didn’t expect you to get past the upgraded security. I’ll admit I felt pretty safe in the Chancellor’s home.”

“I have a few connections in the Chancellor’s staff.”

“No doubt.” So there was a traitor inside the Chancellor’s fold. They would be found and dealt with as soon as they made it through this. Warrick wasn’t a steady as he portrayed, desperation lurked in his eyes. Warrick had planned to catch them sleeping, to be the one holding the weapon at the moment. Garek closed his hand reassuringly around Angeni’s.

“You used Angeni’s name and codes to protect your involvement in Lucius Lendow’s illegal transgen schemes, didn’t you?” Garek demanded.

“It suited my purposes. The Chancellor would not prosecute his own daughter.”

Angeni!

Garek heard the one-word thought, meant for his wife, as soon as she did. His eyes never left Warrick’s. But in his peripheral vision, he observed Angeni’s expression flood with worry and fear for her half-brother.

Coyle.

Yes. Near by. Under stress.

The urgent communication of her name was disjointed, fragmented with rage and frustration, once again as painful in its intensity as their first experience with his thoughts.

Garek’s mind joined with Angeni’s to soothe him and control the telepathic noise. Garek’s own level of stress notched up. Coyle Oside was very angry and very close to

being irrationally out of control.

Angeni. Her name solidified. The only clear word getting through.

We're here. Safe, she answered her brother.

Chahl Oside's voice rang out, "Sahnjun, I suggest you drop your weapon to the floor with the others. I have a new tech X-29 nerver very near my offspring's spinal column. My belief is the two of you care more for his welfare than I do."

Angeni gripped Garek's arm tightly, her hand shook.

A sad fate for father and son.

Angeni gave a startled gasp and winced, realizing this thought was steeped in sadness and regret. Had the thought come from Coyle?

Not Coyle, Garek supplied.

Chahl Oside himself? Her eyes widened, and she stared at the older man. *Yes, it had come from him.* She saw agreement in Garek's expression. Different in tone and timbre, somehow more staccato, edgier, it had been a weak telepathic signal resonated with no refinement. No control because he had no idea he'd sent a message. She realized the man bluffed. She took a deep, steadying breath. However, they could not afford to take a chance his hand would slip on the evil weapon.

"I've often observed that caring for the welfare of others can make people vulnerable," Oside continued. "A very useful theory for me so far."

Angeni noticed the calm and reasoning tone was at great odds with his turbulent thoughts. Suddenly she felt Garek was about to do something. She had to stop him. ***Please don't.***

What, Angel? Hell, the man is right. With apparent reluctance, slowly, Garek did as he was asked, dropping the weapon to the terrace stone.

Angeni knew his anger burned and he hated giving in to the demand. He did not want to let go of the upper hand.

We will get through this love. She tried to reassure him. What good would our lives be if they come at the expense of my brother, your friend? she asked telepathically.

You're right, of course. His meddling is the reason we met.

Don't count me as dead yet, Sahnjun. Coyle said, telepathically. *We will think of something. We have this telepathic link thing to our advantage.*

Better start thinking. Garek answered.

The mercenaries moved in, taking them captive.

“Move,” Warrick said, motioning outward toward the grounds, clearly enjoying the moment.

After a long walk, they stopped at one of the more remote Security Guard Houses, the farthest from the preserve. By the time they reached their destination, the early morning sun rose and the dew simulation machines came on.

The men shoved Angeni and Garek into a small, dark room and locked the heavy door.

Garek prowled every centimeter, carefully looking for a means of escape. At least they had not separated them in confinement. Angeni sat quietly, watching, talking to him. She was speaking to calm him, as he had done for the tiger on Clothoes.

Before they had time to formulate a viable plan of exit, the thick metal door swung open and four men entered the room. Garek stood in front of Angeni.

The men were dressed in blue Olandian preserve police uniforms, the same as Angeni's acquaintance had worn days earlier in the subway. But they were not Olandian. They were Aldorian.

“Osie is ready. We came for the woman,” one said, coming forward, sidestepping Garek to grasp Angeni's forearm.

Garek threw him against the wall. Two others met with the same fate, sliding to the floor. The fourth, and smartest of the group, thought to use his weapon on stun, knocking Garek down to his knees, then he collapsed forward.

Angeni sank to her knees by Garek's side. She had only a second to turn him to his back and check Garek's pulse before the men continued with their plan, pulling her away from him.

Garek would awaken in a couple of hours with no residual harm, she knew this, but still she felt a crawling fear for him. Those two hours of semi-conscious paralysis would be a small hell. If she could just inject a muscle stimulant, she could reverse the stun.

She jerked her arm from the fourth man. "Get me a med-kit," she demanded.

"Get up, woman. He'll live. Be awake in a couple of hours. If you don't come with us peacefully, I'll kill him now. Be glad to do it," he said, dragging her up and shoving her toward the door.

Struggling to keep her balance, Angeni turned on him. "If he has any complications, anything, I'll see the color of your insides."

The man stopped in his tracks, shock and a flash of fear covered his face. He knew she meant what she said. Good.

"By the gods, you are an Aldorian girl!"

Angeni squared her shoulders and walked on in the direction he'd pointed.

As they stepped out into the hall, she came face-to-face with the slimy Froton Warrick.

"You may as well come along peacefully, my dear. It is a pity you did not accept my kind offer to wed you."

Angeni struggled not to spit in his face. It was beneath her station as a Prime Healer to do such a thing.

*** * * ***

Garek was alone. He felt the strange emptiness he associated with the loss of Angeni's presence and their telepathic communication. The same loss he'd felt during the year after his injury when he did not see her. The same need to find her. Now, fighting grogginess, he struggled to remember why he felt the overwhelming certainty Angeni faced danger and he must help her. Now. No time.

Why couldn't he move his hands, his feet. Anything?

If he could get one muscle to move the damned others would follow. Becoming more aware, he recognized the muddled feeling of a weapon stun.

He'd felt something like this before. In the swamp on Gandos. At least he was in a dry spot this time. No numbing wet cold to drain his strength.

He thought of the new prosthetic knee. The artificial moving parts might not be blocked by the stun. Perhaps he could make the damned thing move. He concentrated all his will on that.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

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Chahl Oside stood by a dust-covered desk in a room used for holding and interrogating plantlife poachers. The warlord eyed his estranged son, who stood on the other side of the desk. The offspring reminded him of a younger version of his own father. The look about the eyes was unmistakable. He had sons by two other wives, but this one was the closest to his grandsire of them all. The blonde hair was from the boy's mother. The woman who'd cheated him of so much.

"You try to stop me, Offspring? You look for opportunity even now. I see it in your eyes. You located the girl. Your half-sister," Chahl continued. "How?"

Silence.

"No doubt, the same way I did. Or, maybe your spies among my own people told you. They think you'll take over someday. Marry one of the other clan's women and rule all the feuding triads. Hah! Fools! You and I know differently. You disdain all that is our

Aldor.” He eased himself down into a chair.

“You have the disgusting good nature of your sweet mother, yet my strength. It has proved a formidable combination for you. The Offspring’s eyes flashed fire. If looks could destroy. But you can’t claim to have my experience or the wealth and resources.”

“And you fight, with no rest, to keep your money.”

He laughed without true humor. “Your and my battles are uneven. And about to become even more so. Your mother’s good has disadvantages, Offspring. It comes with a conscience. Will limit your strength, get you killed.”

Coyle spat angrily, “I would rather die than fight dishonorably, as you do. Or live off the property of others.”

“Yes, I know, Coyle.” Chahl smiled a dark smile, almost paternal, and continued, “I’m sure you mean that.” Directed to his men at the door, “Have they brought the girl? What keeps them?”

Just then, she stormed through the doorway, followed closely by Froton Warrick and the Aldorian guards. Her gold hair was in disarray about her face. She threw it back with impatience, eyeing him fiercely and closely.

As Angeni entered the room, she noticed her brother’s thoughts were a firestorm of fears for her, in spite of his outward show of calm strength. And terrible guilt that he had betrayed Sidra in an attempt to direct these men from finding Angeni. An innocent woman he’d never met. He tried hard and failed miserably to cloak his thoughts from her.

She sent a calming message to him. Steady, Brother. We will use the telepathic communication. We will protect Sidra. I know you meant her no harm.

I told them to go after her, instead of you. A coward’s choice.

No! A human’s choice. She stepped to Coyle’s side and touched his arm.

She turned to face Chahl. “The Crusher of Aldor can not hurt me, Brother. Death has already taken his soul.”

Angeni, use caution. Came from her brother.

“You will speak to me only!” Oside declared. With a pass of his hand, he raked the few items on the desk to the floor. A small cloud of dust rose. “I promised you in trade to a new member of the Lead Triad. An Aldorian warrior needs his mate to hold his sanity after battle.”

“That does not concern me. I have no interest in your plans for me. I need a med kit,” she demanded of Chahl Oside, stepping closer to the desk front. She placed her hands on the desk to hide their shaking. She instinctively knew she must show no weakness to this man. “Your hired goons stunned Garek. Get med supplies for me so I can reverse the stun.”

The man was silent, a look of surprise and shock on his face. “Your friend will recover soon enough, girl.”

“Yes, but he struggles through the confusion of nothingness meanwhile. I want him spared that agony. He doesn’t deserve it. He is no criminal. If you want to continue these senseless negotiations with me, you will provide what I ask.”

Chahl Oside shook his head, laughing now, a humorless sound. “Flocking hell, you are not what I expected. Dominant Aldorian blood flows through you, girl. You may not be so soothing to my enemy after all. He may not thank me.”

Suddenly, from the hallway came loud noises, shouts, and the sound of scuffling and bodies being thrown against the corridor walls. Then the broad doors flew open, slamming to the walls at each side with resounding, reverberating thuds.

Garek strode through the door, breathing hard. Angeni could see the unconscious bodies of battered guards in the hallway behind him. All the guards were down. Garek pointed an Aldorian weapon, taken from a guard, at Chahl Oside’s head. She noticed Garek leaned hard against the doorframe. Fighting the stun was taking superhuman strength. He was glorious, an avenging alpha male warrior who’d come to rescue his woman.

“Go ahead and come right in, Sahnjun,” Chahl Oside said, resigned.

***Careful, friend,* came from Coyle, his eyes slashed toward Warrick who was delving into his pocket.**

“Don’t try it, Warrick,” Garek ordered before shifting his eyes back to Oside, his

primary enemy. Warrick dropped his bony hands back to a safe distance from his weapon, not much fight in him.

“Untie Coyle, Angeni.”

She went to work on the bindings.

“You have the advantage now Sahnjun, but I swear by my ancestor’s bones, I’ll follow you. You won’t keep her long. I need this woman. She is promised.” Oside pounded his fist on the desk. “It appeals to my sense of vengeance to use the daughter of my former wife...and another man to protect my empire. I will follow you. Any humanity that gives you sanctuary, will suffer.”

Angeni spoke. “You will search for us as you did for Mother, then? It won’t work. You can haunt our lives, but it won’t stop your ghosts. All your possessions can’t help you now.”

“Shut up, girl. Just shut up,” he said.

Garek’s fingers flexed on the weapon. Taking advantage of Oside’s frustration, he left his position by the door and took possession of his enemy’s laser. And then Angeni’s arm. He tugged none too gently toward the door.

She resisted. “This is not over, Garek. Let me finish talking to him. We must rid our lives of this threat now.”

“Damn, damn, damn,” Garek swore, but the words were resigned. If a man facing the possible threat of an enemy’s reinforcements could be resigned. Looking at her with some annoyance, he gave a grudging nod and took up a guard position to keep an eye on the prone and still men in the hall.

“Thank you,”

“Get on with it. Make it quick,” he snapped.

“You expected me to be more malleable and manageable.”

Chahl Oside stared at her with shocked intensity burning in his gaze.

“You nearly destroyed my mother. Perhaps you did not plan to.” She waved a hand. “It was your nature. And the career path you chose.” Angeni turned to smile reassuringly at Coyle. Her brother agreed with Garek. He distracted her with telepathic messages colorfully spattered with self-directed curses for getting them all in this mess.

Slowly, Brother. If we are to work together as telepaths we must have absolute control.

Assuming we leave here tonight alive, her brother answered, aggravated with her now.

But he controlled his telepathic pathway.

That’s much better. I’m getting most of what you are sending, including the swearing, she teased.

“There are times when cursing the universe and everything in it seems appropriate, baby sister. I’m glad you can find humor in this bleeding mess,” Coyle said with heavy sarcasm. *Garek, do something,* he ordered.

Don’t look to me. Garek communicated, never taking his eyes off the hallway and their means of escape. **“Your sister may get us vaporized, my friend, but we won’t be bored to death by—”**

“Talk to me, girl, not to these two idiots,” Oside interrupted, furious now, his face flushed. “I am your focus.”

“Coyle is your son, Oside. The one you made great plans for,” Angeni said softly. “Isn’t it so? Different plans than the normal father, I suppose.” She felt tears flood her eyes, but she knew she could not afford empathy.

New anger flashed as he seemed to read her expression. “Perhaps! Perhaps! Don’t pity me girl. It was over thirty years ago. Why don’t you fear me, Angeni?”

His tone was different now, thoughtful. He’d used her name for the first time in this battle of wills.

“Your mother feared me. I saw the resemblance between you in the flatvid photos and on Clothoes. That’s how I found you. A media strip about your physical therapy for the genetically injured. Irony. Some of them my doing perhaps. Indirectly, of course. Exactly the kind of thing your mother would have enjoyed, helping the less fortunate.

Undoing my evil, she would have pronounced it. No matter how much treasure I brought her, she only saw the sacrifices made.” He rubbed a hand across the desk. “I kept it from her as long as I could. Inevitably ... she learned the truth.”

Angeni smiled a sad smile of agreement. “Yes, you understood her well.”

“When I saw you, I knew I could make use of you. A formidable bargaining tool. I planned to rescue you, befriend you, have you under my influence before you knew who I was. The offspring and this damned interfering Clothoes Mountain Barbarian have ruined those plans.”

“Glad to do it,” Garek said.

“Failing to gain my trust, you wanted me to fear you. You know how to use a person’s fears against them, don’t you. You thought the Olandian blood would make me timid.”

“By the gods, girl, I had the right to expect it.”

Angeni saw the look of recognition in his cold, silver-blue eyes.

“No, I don’t fear you. I feel pity for you, a deep sadness for what might have been for you and my mother.”

He hit the desk with his fist.

“You feel the need to consolidate your spoils because your time is running out.”

“Enough!” Oside’ shouted, slamming his hand to the desk again, disregarding Garek’s weapon. Now Coyle had joined Garek, and they were on either side of Angeni, edging her toward the door.

“You lie to yourself in saying you have no conscience.”

His brows drew together. “Yes, damn you.”

Angeni continued, knowing she was gambling she could stop him here. Today. This was a battle she had to win. “My mother found the courage to run when she understood your plans for your son’s future.”

Angeni, that's enough, let's go. Now, Garek spoke in her mind, softly, coaxing at first, but by the time he came to the last word, it was a command.

“When she was with you, you had a few moments of light.” Now the man just stared at her with shocked resignation and something like morbid fascination on his face. “Well, I’m damned to a soldier’s hell. You really are an Aldorian telepath. You read my own thoughts,” he said at last, laughing now.

Angeni simply nodded. “The old legends have truth in them apparently.”

Coyle stared in stunned disbelief.

Garek sighed heavily. I should have guessed. I should have known from Angeni’s DNA, when I saw it on Triastra. Too close to yours Coyle, for half-siblings.

Not a surprise to me. Let’s get her out of here. Fast.

Angeni had realized the reason she could read Oside’s thoughts was that she was not Saxton Traek’s daughter as she’d been told. She was the Crusher of Aldor’s daughter. Garek hurt for her.

“It’s so needlessly sad,” she said. “Love wasted on greed.”

“Stop, damn you! Please, just stop.” Chahl turned to Coyle. “Coyle, for the love of fire and stone, take her away from here.”

“Yes. No problem,” Coyle agreed.

“You have what you want, Angeni, I will leave you alone,” the older man said.

***It’s over, Angeni. You’ve done all you can to stop him.* Garek communicated.**

Galvanized, Coyle and Garek wasted no time in doing just as the man asked.

Angeni was ready to leave now and moved willingly with them, but stopped and turned at the door.

“Where are the children?” she demanded.

“I don’t know, girl.” The man dragged his hand through the silver-black hair and looked up at her. He laughed without mirth. “We could not find them to steal from you.”

Garek could almost feel sorry for the defeated warlord.

“He’s telling the truth,” Angeni said. “Hane,” she added, simply.

***Yes.* Garek tugged gently on her arm again to remind her of their retreat.**

***Hane has them hidden somewhere as we hoped.* She breathed a thankful sigh of relief and buried her face in Garek’s shirt.**

Garek held her tight a moment. *We owe him.*

“Let’s get her out of here before he remembers who he is and changes his flocking mind, dammit,” Coyle said.

“Right,” Garek replied, moved to action, leading them around the tied guards.

When they had gone, Chahl Oside dropped his head into his hands, defeated in a way that no enemy had ever accomplished before. His great-grandmother had heard the thoughts of others along a shared family pathway. The girl was his own daughter.

The obnoxious sound of approaching Olandian Security sirens filled the air.

Chapter Thirty

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Angeni, Garek and Coyle stood at the entrance to the preserve subway. Aza and Nethe

stood guard nearby, coached by Angeni to hide their wings from the passersby. A warm, dry wind was stirring the air. She impatiently swiped a wayward lock of hair from her brow.

“The children are fine. Hane said as much when he broke silence,” Garek reassured her.

“I know. I just can’t relax until I see them. They’re so young. So small and fragile. I never dreamed I would be endangering them.”

At that moment, the happy sounds of children filtered from the underground opening. The sounds were soon followed by eight lively little ones. Most of them were astride the small riderbeasts, but the last and smallest, a tiny little girl with red hair and a robotic leg was perched high on Hane’s broad shoulders, laughing in joy and blessedly alive.

Sidra and Isak were there too, each shepherding members of the little group.

“I’m still hungry, Mr. Hane.” The little girl held double handfuls of his abundant, coarse black hair for balance.

He smiled upward in the general direction of his small burden. Angeni realized Hane had quite a handsome smile. “I know you are, sweetheart girl,” he answered, his voice deep and rumbling. “Maybe these kind folks will take pity on our little troop and feed us.”

The little one looked up from the thick hair she held captive. Her face lit with surprise. “Healer Angeni,” she squealed.

“Hello, darling.”

Once again Hane reminded her of someone. Suddenly it came to her, The Founder. The captain of the first Olandian science ship. Of course! She saw his face every day on the currency. *They would not dare use The Founder’s DNA?*

Sure they would. They would find it humorous. Garek answered.

I agree, came from Coyle.

Should we tell him? Angeni asked.

No, Coyle answered quickly.

Garek nodded. *Not until we learn more.* Garek agreed.

Coyle closed his eyes. *The Founder's bloodline has been studied extensively. This will help us save him?*

Yes.

***He's a good friend.* There was great relief in Coyle's telepathic words.**

Just then, the little one rushed into speech. "Healer Angeni, we waited and waited for hours and hours for you to send a message that it was time to come back. Did you catch those bad men? We saw them, asking questions about us and Mr. Hane helped us run and hide, 'cause he says sometimes it's better to run than fight."

Angeni stretched out her arms, and the little girl slid from her perch into her embrace.

She hugged her close. "Yes, baby, sometimes it's far better to run than fight," Angeni said, her voice muffled by tears and soft red curls with sweet baby smell.

"Thank you, Hane," she said. He nodded and grinned. He looked happy.

"Dono is sooo hungry." The little one pointed a small finger behind them to the fat little animal.

***Am hungry,* Dono agreed.**

The other children crowded around as close as the size of their riderbeasts would allow, laughing and all talking at once.

"I'll have to run a gene profile to see if you're Aldorian," Angeni laughed, suspecting the little girl was reading animals' thoughts as she had at the same age. "Can we go home, now?" Angeni asked, turning her face up to Garek.

"You sound much the same as the little girl," he said and kissed her long and deep then nuzzled her hair, not thinking of the people around them.

He pulled away reluctantly. "Yes, Geni, we'll take our little clan home to Clothoes," he

answered.

*** * * ***

When their borrowed PRAX slingship had closed the distance back to Clothoes, Angeni and Garek learned the Jona had moved ahead in their absence. She and her minions used the genetic profiles they'd prepared earlier, sending out invitations to the candidates.

Angeni smiled as she thought of it. Now, a month later, the ladies of The Cultural Exchange gathered for an event dubbed, "The Choosing". The Jona thought the name fitting, as it called to mind the mating customs of her people. The ladies were Clothoes citizens now and should use Clothoes terms and customs, she reasoned.

In a formal ceremony tonight, the women were to name the man they chose for the marriage bond. The event was being hosted at Garek's home.

The Jona enjoyed nothing more than hosting a large party.

Angeni badly needed a break from the tiring festivities. So now she walked out to visit the Nethe and Aza in the stable a short distance from the house. She wore an Olandian gown, much like the one she'd escaped with Garek in in those early days. The same rich blue with matching jewel-incrusted shoes. The heels made walking the stone pathway tricky. The Jona had frowned on her choice of attire, of course, but Angeni felt the reminder of Olandia important. Besides, Garek loved the dress on her and she needed every advantage.

Nethe and Aza had settled in nicely to the private paddocks near the house. They thrived in the healthy sunlight of Clothoes, and seemed to feel the same sense of homecoming here as she had.

She suspected the healthy planet had led to a pregnancy for Aza. If her suspicion proved true, it would be a happy event indeed.

***You love it here, don't you?* she asked, rubbing the stallion's neck.**

Yes, Hippiatra, we do.

"He should," Garek said, as he stepped through the evening shadows of the barn. "Aza is always by his side."

And plenty of delicious pasture grass, the mare agreed. Sleeping in the sun, resting in the shade of ancient trees. Flying for fun. Good exercise.

Will we have a foal, Aza? Garek patted her arched neck. He always rode Nethe, but Angeni sensed the little mare was his favorite.

Too early to tell, hard to hold them long enough to be born. Too many are twins, don't live long. But this one is alone. And is meaner than the others.

Mean? Angeni asked.

Determined. Tough, Nethe clarified for Aza.

Hungry now, Aza said. The trogon wandered off to graze.

Angeni's thoughts turned to the child she already carried herself.

"The Choosing approaches," Garek said as they watched the peaceful sight of the animals eating.

"Isn't it interesting that most of the relationships being formed have little to do with the genetic profiles we matched?"

"Yes, I've noticed the phenomenon. We thought it might be so."

"The ones we put together all show signs of selecting other mates."

"It doesn't matter. They are all within acceptable parameters of genetic distance to save the Olandian bloodlines for the future."

"Yes," she agreed.

"Have you noticed the way Lexa Stolle chases Hane?"

"I've noticed," she said with a smile.

"And he's definitely not interested," he added.

“It isn’t that simple.”

“No?”

“No. Hane believes he will die soon.”

“A logical conclusion, given his origins. Does make it hard to plan. Any progress on his problem?”

“Lexa works night and day to find a solution, going backward through the process that created him, looking for a way to help him. We now know his original genetic parent is The Founder, so I think she can do it.”

Sometimes love can yield solutions when all other avenues are exhausted. She deliberately used telepathy.

Garek stuck his hands in his pockets. He held her eyes with his.

She waited, and then sighed.

You seem to expect me to say something to that.

She raised a brow.

“Angeni, for the last time, say you will give up this Cultural Exchange before it is too late.” Garek winced at her angry expression, but continued, “From the look on your face—that sure as hell was not what you wanted to hear. You are disappointed, hurt. Your beautiful smile is gone.”

She looked away. “I must return and socialize with the others,” she said, her voice lifeless. She turned her back and began walking away.

No! Do not go.

She kept walking.

“Do you believe in love at first sight?” he called after her, raising his voice since she was almost out of sight.

Angeni's heart stopped, and then jerked back to life. She'd asked him the same question during the Challenge Ritual.

Yes, love, and I gave you the wrong answer.

She turned back. "Yes...oh, yes, I believe," she answered, her voice louder this time, but cautious. She moved a few steps, then paused and waited.

Angeni?

"I learned about love at first sight a year ago. When you stormed into my emergency room and my life. So near death I thought you were too late for us. I was irrationally angry you were too late. Then, worse—" She threw up her hands. "—you left me behind. Alone. You walked away without looking back." There was accusation in the last. She closed the distance between them.

Oh, believe me I looked back. He held out his arms to her. She stepped into them. **"I'm sorry, Angel," he whispered. "I was a fool." He put his arms around her and kissed her now, urgent kisses.**

"No. You were needed by Clothoes. The warlords hunted Sidra. The fiancée..."

"If Coyle had told me the bastards also looked for you—"

"You did not know. If you had, you would have gotten yourself killed leading them away."

"I had little idea what the feelings between us were, but I wanted you safe." He pulled her tighter to him, too rough, holding her as if she would escape. He forced himself to loosen her.

"I know."

"Now you will give up The Cultural Exchange?"

She took his biceps in her hands and shook him. She shocked him stiff. "You are so stubborn, Captain Garek Sahnjun."

"I love you," he whispered, his eyes serious.

Oh, heavens. Angeni knew she could not deny this man anything.

I love you. I love you. The rumble of his telepathic words ignited her passion.

So what that he hadn't come back for her, she did love him. ***I love you, too.***

I was coming back to you. I talked Illana into asking for my brother. She wanted him, but had no courage, he communicated.

You were coming back to me? Tears filled her eyes, and her doubt evaporated.

As soon as possible!

Well, that makes all the difference to me.She laughed with joy

He unbuttoned her blouse.

She stilled his hands at her breast. She must make him see that he could participate in the Alliance Cultural Exchange with her. Her adopted people needed them.

She touched his face. ***Will you trust me tonight? As I did not trust you to return to me?***
She pleaded.

Yes.

As he kissed a path to her breasts, she lost her train of thought. ***Garek.***

She knew he meant to have her here now. The doors had solid locks and they'd often made use of the large, comfortable sofa in the living quarters and the privacy afforded in the past month.

“Are you against The Cultural Exchange? You still believe it wrong?” He distracted her with his wonderful, masculine hands.

“No. No. I didn't like the idea at first, but the damned Exchange is working. The Olandian resistance faded with a recent outbreak of Morland's illness.”

“Yes.”

“I worried the risk to your life continued as long as you participated in The Exchange.” He framed her face with his hands. “And I could not bear the thought of you and another man. You’re mine. And it’s more than that. I love you. I want only you. Every day since I awoke in the hospital ship at Dandrovica.”

“Oh, Garek, that’s so sweet, so wonderful.” Tears fell.

“Sweet, hmmm? Just the image a retired Alliance Guardsman wants to cultivate.” Garek laughed, relieved things were going his way for now.

She stood before him completely nude now, working on removing his shirt, adding fire to his already overheated body.

“No, I will not give up The Exchange.”

Shocked, he searched her expression. “Just what in a cold hell do you mean?”

“Hear me out, Garek.” *I will choose you as my mate, as I have planned to do all along.*

After a silence, Garek laughed with joy. Then he sighed with relief and devoured her soft neck. “Damn. I’ve been so blinded by thoughts of you with another man, I overlooked the obvious solution to our problem.”

“Yes, blind is as good a word as stubborn, I suppose.”

“You toy with me.”

“Some. A little.”

“I will never be bored with you.”

“So, what is your answer?”

He inclined his head. “I would be honored by your choice. Happy to give you the children you need to save Olandia.” He smiled his beautiful smile. He drew her down to the earth-toned sofa and covered her with his strength, filling her with one fluid stroke.

“Yes.”

“Tell me again,” he demanded, “I need to hear you say it again.”

“Yes, I will be happy to. Anytime.”

Now.

She smiled. He looked so fierce and demanding, his body so primitively hard against hers. “I love you, my heart,” she whispered, enjoying the length of his arousal inside her.

As if to reward her correct response, he continued moving, taking them higher as they sought the completion of their loving.

And when it came, it was the best lovemaking they’d shared. Much richer for the words of love.

Later as they lay sated, Garek gloried in the feel of her in his arms, the satin warmth of her skin. “I will go to the ASC personally and convince them to allow an exception for the uterine replicator ban.”

“My heart, it is already too late for that.”

“What do you mean?” Garek felt an icicle of fear at the back of his neck. Was she saying she would have no children? He raked a hand through his hair, shocked that the possibility of not having babes with her could frighten him almost, but not quite, as much as the thought of losing her outright. He touched her lovely hair, smoothing it.

“You want children?” she asked.

“Have I neglected to say how much? If it is not to be, we will always have the genetically injured children.”

“Yes, we do.” She kissed him lovingly. “But, as I suspected, I’m already pregnant, my love.” Her hand went to her stomach in a gesture of protection as old as womankind.

A shard of cold steel spread to Garek’s soul, he sat up. “It’s early, can you be sure?”

“Yes, it’s early, love. But I know.” Angeni caught her breath and smiled, her joy in his trust unbelievable. She trembled, her heart pounded. She reached up to touch his jaw

line.

“You can hear the child’s thoughts.”

She laughed that he guessed so quickly. “Not clearly yet.”

“We will transfer the embryo,” he said.

“No! Too much risk to the child.”

Angeni took his face in her hands. *Stop. Stop thinking these things.* He thought of the legends, the tales of how childbirth had been for the women. He could not let her go through that. Jagged pain flowed through his thoughts.

“You know the state of our medical knowledge approaches perfection. Few errors.”

“By the Saints, you lived as an Olandian. You’re a healer. You know the negative possibilities better than I.”

She stroked the pulse at his neck. “Yes, I know the risks all too well. The risks of moving the baby this late are many more than natural childbirth is to me. Losing the little one is an unacceptable cost. She’s too important. It’s all right. You must not worry. It won’t be so bad. We will see this through together. You can sing me the chants of Aldor.”

He smiled that beautiful smile, then pressed her to his side again, kissing her. “Yes, we will see it through together. We’re a team, my angel.”

She? he asked.

Angeni’s laughter rang out at his stunned expression. *Our baby is a she, yes.*

* * * *

Before The Choosing ceremonies began, Garek stood by an open doorway watching the Jona. She was very much the clan leader tonight. Her loyal, drones and minions rushed to do her bidding, to make everything perfect.

As she turned, her regal strides carried her to another corner of the room needing to

be shaped into her particular brand of acceptable, Garek blocked her path.

“You would risk my woman’s life for your successor?” Not very tactful, but his frustration often cost him diplomacy with the Jona. Knowing for sure Angeni was pregnant, he must stand his ground where his new family was concerned. His first loyalty was to his wife and child.

“You care for the woman then. Good. It makes things better.”

“Easier for her to use the skills you taught her?”

“Yes,” his grandmother answered with a shrug.

He laughed darkly at her honest response. “You deliberately neglected to tell her she could protect herself from conceiving during the Challenge.”

“Yes.” Her eyes held no apology. “The legends exaggerate the pain and danger of natural childbirth.”

“How can you know that?” he demanded, his voice harsh with anger.

“There have always been those who have not used the machine. Secretly.”

“You?” He guessed.

“Yes, while my husband was alive, we lived in the mountain cliffs exclusively. He did not acknowledge the Jona Council. The Challenge never ended for us.”

“I did not know.”

“Of course not. It was years before your birth ... I should say before you were removed from the machine. One thing about the replicators—you can tell the strong-willed children early. Prepare yourself. Your little one will be strong-headed.” She smiled with a twinkle in her eyes.

“You will help her prepare for the birth.” Garek’s words were cold and clipped, more demand than request.

“Of course, I will. I would not jeopardize my successor.” She smiled in turn, and

almost appeared hurt he would think she would do otherwise.

She gave what was meant to be a reassuring smile, but it seemed predatory. The Jona was not good at reassurance.

“There are people who have skills, special women who help us in this most important matter,” she continued. “Women who have been through it...and even believe in the merit of the old birth process. They will teach her breathing techniques. We will find them.”

“Good.”

“Not that a woman with the courage to take on the Jona Council and win will need much help,” she said cryptically.

“What do you mean?”

“She had your Challenge declared valid. Said you proved to her that you could protect and provide for her in extraordinary circumstances. More than once. Time spent was of no meaning. Claimed that nothing more should be required. The Council agreed. She is your wife to Clothoes.”

Garek stared a long moment, stunned. “I am pleased and honored beyond words.”

“You should be.” She laughed and patted his hand before going back to her work.

*** * * ***

When Angeni stepped to the raised platform that night, Garek’s heart pounded. The elegant skirts of the beautiful blue dress he’d relished helping her back into, after their loving, fell softly about her ankles. As she walked the jewels of her shoes caught the light. At her side, her own father, Saxton Traek, acted as her clan representative this time. Coyle, Hane and the children stood near by as well, to fill out her family.

“I choose Garek Sahnjun of the Archon clan as my bondmate,” she said in a firm and clear voice.

Garek stepped forward. His grandmother walked by his side.

The Jona beamed and spoke in formal tones, “The family of Archon assures you that

you will not regret your choice.”

As Angeni and Garek stood close together facing the large crowd, she reached for his hand. The Jona caught her eye with a disapproving frown. Angeni smiled in response.

“There were many surprises during The Choosing.” Angeni said minutes later as they watched the closing of the festivities.

“Yes, the women selected bondmates for reasons known only to them,” Garek agreed.

“Perhaps they are led by instinct.”

“Or, an unknown sense of perception. Similar to telepathy?”

She laughed happily. “Or love at first sight,” she whispered in his ear.

“Whatever the reasons, the Alliance Science Commission achieved its goal for the first wave.”

“Who was the beautiful woman who asked for Coyle Oside to join her in The Choosing,” he said.

“Reva Notah.” She frowned fiercely. “You think Reva is beautiful?”

He threw up his hands in mock surrender. “In the academic sense only.”

“Reva replaced the woman who was Warrick’s informant in the group.”

“The Alliance investigation of the entire matter goes well. Warrick is supplying details of Lendow’s smuggling operation in return for leniency.”

“Any word of Chahl Oside?”

“No, he still eludes capture. He was not involved in the genetic smuggling or the murders.”

“Coyle accepted Reva when she asked him to join her in The Exchange,” Angeni said.

“Yes, a surprise.”

“There was sadness in her eyes when Lexa Stolle declined to choose anyone, saying she needed more time. And she watched Hane as she said it.”

“I noticed as much,” he agreed. *Don’t worry, they will work it out.*

I hope so.

Epilogue

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Six months later, Angeni lay on a blanket by the lake in the mountains. Garek was next to her, so close she felt his breath against her cheek. The noises of the busy station provided pleasant background.

Her eyes were fixed on their newborn child, cuddled in the small space between the two parents. The little one made contented whispers, soft humming noises as it nursed from its mother’s breast. Its small pink fingers were curled in tight fists. One tiny fist was locked around her father’s large forefinger.

“I didn’t think it would matter,” Garek murmured.

She smiled warmly, puzzled as she shifted her attention from the child to her husband. “Matter?” she prompted.

“To be the first to sire a daughter to my clan in two generations. I never felt the need to produce a female child to justify my existence. I thought I would be just as proud to have a son. I fooled myself. Perhaps I was wrong.” The pride reflected in his strong features was unmistakable.

“Given your culture, and the time your grandmother waited for a successor, pride in

your daughter is normal. But you would love a son just as much. I assure you.”

With careful touches, he stroked the child’s small fingers. “The influence of a thousand or so years of ancestry is strong. My family has the right to use the clan surname again. I would like to name her Acana. Acana Sahnjun-Archon.”

Her eyes filled and she was unable to speak.

“What do you think?”

“It is Clothoes language for ‘eagle’?”

“Yes. Our little eagle. She will have a seat on the Jona Council by birthright. She might even become the Prime Minister of the Alliance.”

Angeni smiled, both awed and amused at his pride and little Acana. “Our Acana will be a wonderful Prime Minister, I’m sure. But she might prefer to join the Alliance Guard like her father.”

He laughed. “I’ll try to leave the decisions to her.”

“Wise. Such beautiful dark hair she has,” Angeni mused, lifting the fine strands. Luxurious dark curls framed the baby’s small face, so soft to the touch.

“My dark hair and your amber eyes, an unusual combination.

“Yes. Have you noticed the difference in the Jona?”

“Yes, she’s pleased, to say the least.”

“At peace with herself at last.”

“And, thank the Saints, with me,” he said, laughing a hearty chuckle, before going on more soberly, “I did not enjoy disappointing her.”

“Responsibility is important to you. I’m glad the Jona didn’t get her way in the matter of your first fiancée. It worked out far the best for my purposes.” She caressed his jaw.

“Yes, it turned out well.” Garek kissed the tip of her nose. *The gaping empty spot in my*

soul is full now. Thank you, my angel.

The words touched her mind in soft waves. *My pleasure.*

“If you feel recovered enough from the birth, tomorrow, we will go see the new school for the children,” he said.

“I feel great, fully recovered.”

“Scared the hell out of me, but it was a joy to experience. Once.”

Poor love, the birth had worn on him. She patted his large hand. “I can’t wait to see the school. Is that where Hane has gone?”

“Of course, that’s why I pushed construction to an early finish. His hovering has limited my opportunities to love my wife.”

She laughed with joy at his remembered annoyance. The baby stopped feeding and grinned in reply to her mother’s joy. “He is good at his bodyguard work.”

“He promised your brother he would help guard your safety. He meant to keep that promise.”

“Yes, he smothered us,” she agreed.

“I think Coyle knew what he was doing when he told Hane we needed his services more than he did.”

“Perhaps Coyle wanted some privacy for a while ...”

“And Hane needs to be here, by the water, near the children who accept him.”

“They’re his family now. Lexa is still turning away every eligible possibility your computer finds for her.” Angeni shifted her position. Acana gave a disgruntled cry at being dislodged. She stroked the little ones’ back.

“Hmmm,” he agreed, watching the baby with open fascination in his blue eyes.

“I’m sure Lexa will ask for Hane in the next Choosing.”

“He will never allow her to love him.”

“He may not have a choice in the matter,” she said.

“Yes, love is a strong force,” he agreed. Solemnly he went on, “Every man should have the good fortune to be loved by a warm-hearted, sexy woman.”

“Well, I do love you, Captain Sahnjun.”

“And I love you. With everything in my heart and my soul.”

The End