

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



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His Sahvria

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HIS SAHVRIA

Reese Gabriel

Chapter One

The Vhrazhian Ambassador to Erth was missing and as far as Agent Tryla Numidia was concerned, he could stay that way.

Unfortunately, her superiors at ErthSec took a different view.

Tryla's summons to Headquarters was priority 1-A, which left her just enough time to roll out of bed and hop under the sanitizing beams before racing across the dome to the chief's office.

"I'll need a full download," she announced, arriving at the office of her android boss Sonyago. "And don't keep me waiting. I have a vacation next week on the Seti Nine and I don't intend to miss it for some Vhrazhian lowlife."

"Not so fast," said the chief. "We can't turn you loose on this one. Not just yet."

Alarms went off in Tryla's head. "What in blazes does that mean? What are you two up to?"

Sonyago was a bi-face, a boigurl model, which was a little distracting, especially when the two genders vied for attention, thereby creating an almost constant spinning effect as the head rotated from front to back.

She had been dealing with Yago, the male side. Now they switched, revealing the dreaded Sonya.

Much as Tryla hated to stereotype, it never failed. Use the male to cut to the quick then use the female for over-analysis and obfuscating.

"Agent Tryla, you seem hostile today," Sonya purred.

Tryla put hands to hips. She was a well proportioned, athletic brunette. She kept her hair in a ponytail because it was simple to maintain. She avoided makeup implants like the plague and had never visited a designer body sculpt studio or clothing droid in her life. She liked her basic boots and her one-piece, skintight uniform of black liquex, not as a fashion statement but to intimidate.

The look served her well as an agent and also in her personal life. The last thing she wanted when she went out for an etherbeer or a goodie blip was to have some man on her tail. Many had made the mistake, none made it twice.

"Quit practicing psychology without a license, Sonya," Tryla growled. "You're going to try to stick me with a partner again, aren't you?"

Sonya laughed, producing a slightly shrill metallic ping. "After the last time, Tryla? Do you really think we would put you together with another *human* agent again?"

"Considering the amount of time he had to spend in psych-rehab after I was through with him?" she recalled. "I wouldn't think so."

Sonya had raised Tryla's suspicions, however, by placing the tiniest emphasis on the word human.

"Don't even tell me you are fixing me up with some kind of robo-agent? Stars and comets! Why don't you guys just do a fresh memsweep on me and put me out of my miserable classified existence. I'll serve as a happy little clerk in bio records, I don't care."

Sonyago's servo gears went into overdrive.

The Yago head was back and fast.

"Tryla, let me be blunt," he said from behind the plexiglass desk. "The dips have been on overdrive trying to keep this incident from blowing up. Have you stopped to think what would happen if for one second the Vhrazhians believed we were holding their ambassador hostage or worse, that we have harmed him in any way?"

Tryla gave an indifferent shrug. If he expected her to fold before diplomatic hyperbole, he was sorely mistaken. "Obviously, they would come at us with their entire war fleet and we would beat them, just like last time."

If Yago had been equipped to scowl, he would have. "We did not 'beat them', Agent Tryla, we signed an armistice. The Erth Federation and the Vhrazhian Empire are now full and complete allies. They have proved their friendship to us in many ways in the last few years, including helping us against the Harn Menace, which, as you know, threatens all civilized races."

Tryla was in no mood for dipspeak. If the Vhrazhians were on Erth's side now it was pure self interest. She didn't trust them and she never would. "Sure, we are allies and pigs fly and every time an android beeps, an angel gets its wings."

"I told you, Yago," said Sonya as though Tryla were not in the room. "This assignment is wrong for her. It is too much to ask after what happened to her family."

"Sonya, we have been over this," said Yago.

Oh, great, now Yago and Sonya were going to get into it with each other.

"If you two love birds need some alone time," Tryla said.

"Tryla," said Yago, affecting his deepest and most masculine voice. "While we recognize that you personally might welcome another hundred-year war, the rest of us do not. The Erth Federation and the Vhrazhian Empire are committed to peace. Their government has agreed to give us complete leeway where this investigation is concerned, provided we allow one of their own to participate every step of the way as a partner."

"Spy, more like," Tryla said contemptuously.

"Actually, we believe Agent Vharhin's help will be invaluable. Are we not searching for a Vhrazhian? Who better to trace the missing ambassador's steps, to get inside his head, than one of his own kind?"

"I understand Vhrazhians just fine," Tryla said acidly. "I've been to the bubble zoo to see the snakes, the vultures, the Morlian toad dragons."

"I know how difficult this must be," Sonya soothed. "But try to see it a new way. This is a chance for your own personal growth as well."

"Sorry," said Tryla, feeding back Sonya's own words. "I lack the objectivity. I'm too consumed by memories of my lost family. Oh, wait, I forgot, I don't have the memories. They were swept when I signed on with you jokers."

"You are taking what I said earlier as an attack, Tryla." Sonya was moving into that smug motherly mode. "I think you really need to look inside yourself. What are you afraid of? That you will not appear sufficiently competent in comparison to Vharhin?"

Tryla gave that the nanosecond's consideration it was worth. "Actually, I'm thinking I'll rip him to shreds and cause a diplomatic incident."

"Perhaps your fears center around something more...sensitive. Yago, would you leave us a moment?"

Tryla lost patience. "He can't leave, Sonya, he's growing out of the back of your head. Would you just get to the point?"

"I spoke in euphemism, Tryla, we use those in polite society."

"Well, I'm not polite." Tryla knew she was pushing the bounds of insubordination but Sonyago wasn't just her boss, they were also the closest things she had in this world to family and friends.

Over her ten-year career, she had found them to be far more human than any of the flesh-and-blood hearts she had encountered.

"Take all the time you need, Sonya," said Yago, shutting down his brain functions.

At once the glowing purple of the android's skin faded to a pale pink.

Pink. Tryla hated the color with a passion.

Sonya exhaled. "All right, now that it's just us females, let me ask you, does this have anything to do with your fears of the special sexual powers of Vhrazhian males over humanoid females?"

Oh, for stars' sake, give me a break.

"What did we fight this war for, Sonya? So that supposedly intelligent super-brain android females could buy into the same mumbo-jumbo male supremacist myths that have kept Vhrazhian women as second-class citizens for eons?" she demanded. "It would have been the same for Erthwomen too, if we had lost the war and you can take that to the nearest credit exchange."

"Politics aside, dear, the effects are physiological," Sonya persisted. "The Vhrazhian equivalent of testosterone has been shown scientifically to have an effect on females similar to that of alcohol."

"Don't call me dear," snarled Tryla, who could hold her liquor as well as any man. "And don't throw physiology at me. A properly trained human intelligence can counteract primitive stimuli in all kinds of ways. If I walk past a lake infested with bleen maggots, I will have a physiological urge to toss my cookies but I suppress it. Encountering a Vhrazhian male is no different, except the maggots are less disgusting."

"I have been compared to many things in my life," proclaimed a male voice from the doorway, the tone vaguely accented, deep, rich and toe-curling. "But never a bleen maggot."

Tryla whirled, facing the newcomer.

She drew her weapon on sheer instinct, nerve endings screaming on high alert as she moved into shooting stance, the needle beam aimed directly at his forehead.

The Vhrazhian did not blink. His face was all angles and his lips curved ever-so slightly. He was a cool customer, she gave him that.

Heartbeats passed, her eyes locked on his. She had never seen a Vhrazhian in the flesh. Damn, what was wrong with her? If she were in the field right now he would have drawn his own weapon in return and shot her dead. She tried not to breathe.

What was that scent? Warm, inviting, savage, dangerous, born of an unknown world, at once lush and lean and ravenous.

She felt a swelling in her nipples, matched with a hunger between her thighs, a damp twitching.

Her brain raced to process, trying to keep ahead of her body.

He was impressive, all right—two meters tall, broad-shouldered with long dark hair, braided down the middle of his corded back. He had the physique of a martial arts fighter or a gel swimmer, insolently displayed in a skintight green unisuit and black boots, not an ounce of fat anywhere, only sinew and muscle to draw the eyes, up and down, left and right.

Tryla's libido screamed in warning. He was gorgeous as a statue but so much more alive in his sculpting, like some ancient Greek god or the alien equivalent thereof.

Pulsing, her body drawn toward his, wanting to collide, meld, be consumed. Her nostrils flared. This was all biochemical. She could deal with it.

The gun... Fire the gun.

She wanted to but couldn't summon enough loathing. The differences—the subtle deviations from the human—were intriguing rather than disturbing. Cheekbones higher than a human male's, a strong jaw, lips made to pronounce unknown words, artfully crafted brows. His skin was different too, slightly red, like a weathered rock from the painted deserts.

She couldn't begin to identify the hue of his eyes.

Amber? Gold? No, there was a darker glint, coppery.

Not an Erth color.

The realization hit her hard. There was another world inside him, another way of seeing, thinking, being. What was going on in that handsome head? He was troubled by something, his brow was furrowed. Not just this case, there was more. But what could be more important than war and peace?

Something drew her to him. This man needed comforting...by a female. He would welcome her but not in any way she was used to. He would make her body sing. He

would take from her and give. She wouldn't be an agent though, she would be something very different—underneath him, yielding, his rock-hard cock between her thighs, inside her slippery sex, moving, penetrating to her core, demanding the full surrender of her femininity.

Tryla was snapped from her reverie by the Vhrazhian's voice.

"If you intend to kill me, I recommend you aim here, at the precise center of my heart. Its location is a bit different than that of your own."

He was pointing at his magnificent chest, dead center.

Frowning, she lowered the weapon.

Okay, so he looked like an ancient Greek god *and* he didn't crack under pressure but that didn't mean a thing in her book. She hated his kind. She didn't trust them and she would ditch him at the first available opportunity.

"Agent Tryla," said Yago, having turned himself back on. "May I present to you Agent Vharhin, of the Vhrazhian Imperial Security Service."

Tryla narrowed her gaze. He wasn't just a Vhrazhian agent, he was a member of VISS—the emperor's dreaded secret police. Things were getting better by the minute. Exactly how many souls had perished under the VISS' so-called interrogations during the endless war?

It was anyone's guess.

An armistice, they'd called it.

Tryla could tell them where to stuff their armistice.

"Perhaps you should have introduced me as the nearly deceased Vhrazhian agent," Vharhin said dryly.

Tryla was not about to give in. "If that's your idea of a joke, no one's laughing. Frankly, if it were up to me, you would be dead. You and all the rest of your kind."

"Agent Tryla!" Sonya and Yago spoke together, the effect somewhat earsplitting.

"It's all right," said Vharhin. "I require no defense."

That's because you don't have any.

"You are gracious, Agent Vharhin," said Yago. "But we cannot and will not allow any agent of ours to advocate genocide."

"It's not genocide I'm after," said Tryla, directing her comment straight at the alien. "Only the males deserve to die. That will give the women a fighting chance at life—their first chance ever."

Vharhin smiled or at least she thought it was a smile. He could have been snarling for all she knew of his culture's facial expressions. "I can see, Agent Tryla, that we could enjoy some very interesting political discussions."

"Really?" She arched a brow. "I wasn't aware your kind had discussions with females. Or did you intend to talk to me via the end of a whip?"

He offered no facial reaction to the provocation, much to her annoyance. "The whip is an Erth invention," he said. "I understand the ambassador has quite a collection. Perhaps he will show us when we find him."

Tryla bristled. "If that's your subtle way of saying I'm wasting time, I'd suggest you be a little more up-front in the future. I don't like mealy-mouthed people. Not that you are a person."

"We have the blips to download," Sonya said, ending the sparring. "Agent Vharhin, will your neural constructs allow for direct input or will you require adaptation?"

"Thank you for your consideration," he said with annoying gentlemanliness. "But I am able to absorb most forms of energy encryption."

"Bully for you," said Tryla. "Can we get on with this please?"

A pair of silvery balls appeared in the air, hovering in front of them. Each was some fifteen centimeters across and fitted with millions of tiny pinpoint inductors. Through them would come the blips, the tiny micro-parcels of information collected so far on this case.

As a result they would be able to move directly to the advanced levels of the investigation, which was crucial given that the success rate of recovering a missing person decreased statistically by at least five to ten percentage points every solar rotation.

"Ready?" said Sonya, as if this made any possible difference.

Typical for ErthSec, Yago piped in at the last minute with one of those priceless pearls that Tryla liked to put under the heading of "Would have been nice to know that a little sooner, when I could have done a flipping thing about it".

"This is a new process, agents. You will both be blipped by Erthpuls simultaneously. You'll have to face, just for a microsec, to take it. We'll save a lot of time and you'll have it on subcutaneous backup."

Tryla's heart skipped a beat. Were Sonya's brain waves scrambled? Vharhin wasn't even human. Facing was a personal, private experience—emotional, not information-based. It was also damn tricky. Tryla knew contract lovers ten revs into it who didn't face well, and she was supposed to do it with a frigging alien and a Vhrazhian at that?

For an entire microsec, no less. Maybe that didn't sound like a long time but try living it in hell and you'd sing a different tune.

Vharhin had no time to prepare for the experience. No sooner had the words been spoken by the chief of Erth Security about facing than they were bathed in a blinding light, he and the Erth female, their psyches in collision.

It did no good to close his eyes. The light was in his brain, flashing along the paths of his neurons too fast to analyze. Before he knew it, the information was already in his memories, as if he had collected all the data himself.

The whole thing was over in less than one of his Vhrazhian heartbeats—thick and solid and slow—its rhythm designed for harsher, more arid climates than Erthers were accustomed to.

At present that heartbeat was mildly accelerated, and the tips of his ears were tingling, this being a general response to environmental stimuli for one of his kind.

Vharhin had certainly not expected any such mental linking with the human female. To say he was startled, though, would be to misunderstand his people's psychology. Vhrazhians were generally incapable of surprise. Instinctively they focused their energies on accepting and understanding sudden change with the intent of restoring equilibrium—sometimes to the point of obsession.

At present Vharhin's equilibrium had been seriously upset by contact with the mind of this human agent with the explosive temper. He had touched her core—exploded with it, more like. The fire and energy of her being at once perplexed and attracted him. She could have been a Vhrazhian male for her outward confidence, her ability to take on the world.

And yet she was most definitely female. The contours of her thoughts, the channels of her will bore many of the same seductive, unpredictable imprints of the women of his species. At one level, her emotions were clear—her hatred for him, her will to perform her duty, her intense determination to stay independent.

But she was hiding things underneath, most notably her passion, which he encountered as a deep blue pulse, a boundless sea of sexual need.

An ocean to the natural desert of his soul.

She made him thirsty for an unknown and possibly addictive taste.

Vharhin was barely aware of the security chief's final instructions. Tryla didn't seem to be listening either. She was tight-lipped, red-faced, clearly anxious to be dismissed.

She would not be like a Vhrazhian woman in bed, Vharhin decided. Vhrazhian females pleased men with their bodies and gave of their hearts—no dissimulation, no nonsense. They performed like clockwork and they never disappointed. This female would have to be conquered. A part of her wanted to be. Did she even know this herself? Had she confronted her own fantasies?

Tryla clearly had mixed feelings about men. She was suspicious, naturally competitive—she prided herself on besting them at anything. She did not have sex. What was she afraid of? A part of her wanted to surrender...was that it?

Vharhin now had two puzzles. He must find their missing ambassador and avert the war...and he must understand his new partner.

She did not want his help. She resented him at many levels, for a whole host of reasons. His race, his gender, his role as one who would be sharing her work—a partner. To some extent the edge between them would keep them honest but they mustn't cut each other to shreds.

Vharhin would have to appear to yield. He was the male. He was stronger. His race was older. And wiser.

Though the last thing in the world he would do would be to reveal any of this to Tryla. She was a woman who belonged to a proud, headstrong young civilization. If she felt patronized, if her inadequacies were brought to light, she would not work with him at all.

"If you require anything," the android chief said by way of goodbye, its male and female voices speaking together. "We shall make it available."

"No, thank you," Tryla said, nose in the air, spinning about on her heel. She moved with the grace and arrogance of a cat. Vharhin fell in behind her, his nostrils instinctively flaring.

He craved to know what she would be like sexually, performing her ritual surrender to a mate. Her body was harder, firmer than a Vhrazhian female, though she was curved quite deliciously. She bore herself in such a paradoxical way, with the pride of a male warrior and yet there was no mistaking the natural turn of her hip, the outthrust of the breasts. Was it his imagination or was she displaying her body before him?

Vharhin would have to take his time. He would make love to her over the course of an entire Erth night. An hour alone to undress her as she lay in the bed of her taking, slowly tantalized and teased and stripped, her hands overhead, palms up, utterly helpless. A Vhrazhian female, in the presence of her sahvril, her husband and lord, did not touch her body or his without permission. She waited. She obeyed.

But Tryla would not obey, not right away. She would rebel. She would fight her desires and his. A kiss would bring her around. His mouth pressed to those willful lips and they turned to petals, soft as silk. He had never seen lips like hers—so curious, full and pale, alabaster like her skin. A Vhrazhian would be darker. How would that pale flesh of hers respond to his hand, firm and light?

And how would she respond to his male heat, the full ripening of his sexual scent which no Vhrazhian woman could resist?

He was full of questions, full of sensations. She smelled of an Erth meadow. Fresh and green. An alien environment but not at all repulsive as he might have thought. Different...but not unpleasant. And her hair—not black like his people's but lighter, the color of sensuous, smooth tree bark.

That hair bobbed as she walked, hips swaying with obvious disdain.

She had it tied back, which made him wonder how it would appear loose, fit for a man to run his fingers through. A Vhrazhian woman always kept her hair loose when with her mate. It was her duty to allure her mate thusly and to remain always aware of her place as treasured, desired object in his heart.

Vharhin had to remind himself the culture was different. She was not deliberately taunting him, wearing her hair as a man. This was the way on Erth. Females did as they chose. If they happened to inflame a male, that was his problem. If he wanted to pull

her into his arms, unbinding her hair and kissing her into submission, that was his problem.

The timing, of course, couldn't be worse. He needed all of his wits about him. This was not his planet and potentially criminal investigations were hardly his strong suit, despite his presented credentials.

Just as Tryla was not all she seemed under that tight uniform, neither was he under his borrowed Erth clothes. Tight clothes, which made his body feel strange, confined...like a tiger in a cage, needing to be free to hunt.

The strangest thing of all was the increase of his blood pressure. He was very close to erection. This should not be. A Vhrazhian became hard at will, only when appropriate and only for his chosen mate. He had no mate and there were reasons for this. Of all males on his planet, he must be the most disciplined and exacting. Only one in a trillion would prove worthy of him, and she must be Vhrazhian, not human.

Least of all a female whose very nature was to challenge a man.

Something was most definitely out of kilter here. It should have been her gravitating to his orbit and not vice versa. Vharhin was uncertain—he did not feel in control. And he did not like it.

It was unseemly. In Vhrazhian terms, it was downright...obscene.

He must get himself in order and quickly. Or there was going to be disaster for both him and the woman. Not to mention for two mighty civilizations poised at the brink of war.

Speaking of war, Tryla had stopped in the tubular, pure white corridor and turned to face him. She looked ready to fire the next volley, daring him to take a step closer.

He would but the consequences might be disastrous for both of them.

Focusing his heartbeat, he readied himself as she opened her mouth. His position could not have been more difficult, standing in an office eight hundred stories high in the central cylinder of Erth Security, smack-dab in the middle of Erth's main dome, a species who until recently had been his people's sworn enemy.

How pale this sun was, how indifferent compared to the furious, far-flung Vhrazhian one. He ought to feel nothing here but a steely resolve to finish quickly and leave.

If only she were not so beautiful. If only she were not in his head like a waking dream that threatened to change everything.

Tryla had more than enough fury to spread around. This Vhrazhian had earned his share, just for being born, as had his species for all they had done in the war and for their absurd way of life. Sonyago had earned some too, for his/her dirty tricks and the whole of Erth for managing to misplace the Vhrazhian Ambassador, if indeed he was only lost and not in more dire circumstances.

"Listen closely," she said to Vharhin as soon as the portal to chief's office slid closed. "Because I do not like to repeat myself. I don't like you, I am sure you don't like me. Your ambassador is missing and I am going to find him. The best way to help is to stay out of my way. As far as possible. In fact, why don't you go home and I will call you when I'm done."

Vharhin's lips curled slightly. She interpreted that as smugness. She could only imagine what he thought of her. On his world, women were slaves with no rights, no role except bearing children, cleaning and taking care of their husband's cocks.

No woman should ever want that. That's what the war was for—so her planet's females did not have to crawl and grovel.

"Agent Tryla, we know that isn't possible. We have our orders, you and I. We must cooperate."

"Yes, I'm sure you like the idea of me following orders. I bet you'd like to be giving them, wouldn't you?" she accused.

His presence, so calm and strong, seemingly immovable, was having its effect on her. If she was a storm, he was a mountain. She had this feeling that she would never find her way around him, never outthink him and even if she destroyed him, ground him into the dust, that dust would still be...mountain.

Tryla wanted to see him naked—not just to satisfy the lust of her eyes and loins but to understand how he was put together. What made him what he was? What sort of passions did he have? What did he like during sex making? Vhrazhian females were widely known to be sexually captivated by their males, dependent on the attentions of one lord. The males, by contrast, were allowed access to more than one.

The insolent bastard. What did he make them do? Did they kneel before him and kiss that magnificent cock of his, so obvious under the unisuit? Did he entwine his fingers in their hair and compel them to take him deep?

She had seen Vharhin looking at her hair. Did he want to grab hold of it? What was his problem?

Tryla was no slave. When she made love with a man, it was on her terms—tumbling, acrobatic pleasure, fifty-fifty, with her on top as much as she wanted. No man would or could overwhelm her, of this she was certain. As certain as she was of her hatred for Vharhin and all he stood for.

"It would not serve our interests for me to command you," said Vharhin. "Or vice versa. Our only hope is equality. We must adapt and quickly."

She hated him all the more for being reasonable. "Fine," she spat. "But don't think I am fooled by this act. I know what you are."

"You could not know me, Tryla. You only just met me."

"We faced, didn't we?" she retorted. "I would say we got to know each other in a hurry," she shot back, instantly regretting her words.

For stars' sake, why did she have to bring that up? She was trying to keep it neatly packaged, locked away—that spectacular explosion of connection with Vharhin's neural net.

It had been disturbingly intimate, the mind equivalent of sex. He was fire and she was the moth. It was difficult to put face experiences into words or even coherent images.

The closest Tryla could come was the feeling of having licked the Vhrazhian's bare skin, his warm chest, the scent of a hot, far, unknown desert, the pungent odor of alien perspiration. Her small, Erth female tongue, curious and greedy, running its way up to his nipples and then back down...between his legs.

She shivered, pushing the rest down.

This was not going to be pleasant. Connected with all the implanted data she needed for the case was...him. It reeked of him, made her hot and weak...and needy.

That was not normal. That was not good.

"Vhrazhians are not like Erthlings," he replied. "I do not think the facing, as you call it, has the same effect."

Tryla frowned. He wanted to deny it? Fine. Or hadn't he known she was metaphorically there, in neural form, split down to whirling atoms, her particles licking his? Maybe she wasn't even sexually attractive to him?

A new burst of rage sliced through her. For all she knew, he was looking at her as if she were some kind of bug—ugly, useless. Well, she would return the favor. "Damn straight we're not like you and I couldn't be happier. Now are we going to get to work or not?"

"I suggest we begin by interviewing anyone who was in the neighborhood of the embassy the night the ambassador disappeared," Vharhin affirmed.

Tryla shook her head, allowing the data to intermix with her conscious mind, her intuition. "I disagree. We know he left the Embassy, we know what time and we know he went by personal transport bubble. What we don't know is what was on his mind. That is where we have to start."

"What was on his mind, as you put it, would have been his duty," Vharhin declared. "A Vhrazhian of his breeding and position would think of nothing else."

Tryla scoffed. "Is this how you do police work back on Vhrazhia? Here on Erth, we begin with maximum suspicion. We don't know a damn thing yet about anybody, least of all your ambassador. Until you can prove to me he didn't make himself disappear to start a war or run off to join the circus, I'll entertain the possibility. Everyone's a suspect, anything is possible. We follow our gut, we get into his world, his head...and we find him."

"This does not sound efficient to me," said Vharhin.

Tryla tried not to notice the way his eyes glinted, the way his forehead creased. That was a kissable forehead.

"You think we would do better going back over the same territory that's already been covered?" she asked. "You blipped the data just like me. He was seen leaving the Embassy shortly after dark. The initial Peace Patrols already conducted interviews in the surrounding area. Nothing was turned up. The transport bubble he used was an untraceable dip vehicle and no one saw him arrive anywhere. Whatever the truth is, the trail is cold until we heat it up. It could lead anywhere. Maybe someone wants this war to start again, maybe he was clubbed over the head for his credit folder, we don't know. For now, we need to go to your Embassy, chum, that's all there is to it."

He paused for a second. "Agent Tryla, may I be frank with you?"

"Go for it," she challenged. "It's not like I could possibly respect you any less for what you might say. You are already at rock bottom in my book."

"Point taken," he said. "The problem is, you are an alien and you are also female. The Embassy is a part of Vhrazhia, it is our world. Perhaps if you told me what to look for, gave me a list of questions I could go on my own."

She arched a brow. "Right, Sherlock, like I am going to trust you with something like this." Vharhin stiffened. Had she actually succeeded in annoying him? Good. He had better get used to it.

"I do not understand why you are calling me Sherlock," he said.

"Sherlock Holmes was a fictional Erth detective in the pre-dome times, when people lived in open cities. He always solved his crimes. In your case I was being sarcastic."

"I assure you," he replied. "I am competent and equipped to deal with the Embassy staff."

"I'll bet you are. VISS style, right? Thumbscrews, a little time on the rack?"

"What are thumbscrews?" he asked. "Are they devices your Sherlock character would use?"

"No, thumbscrews and racks belonged to our medieval days when most criminal investigations were conducted through torture. I'm a bit of a history buff. Fortunately, I'm allowed to keep most memories from my research, unlike those of my field experiences."

"I see. So the reference to torture is also sarcastic?"

"No, that one was quite serious. I know how you VISS types operate. Torture is your middle name."

His eyes darkened—sunset over gold. She had hit a nerve, all right. "You should not speak of what you do not understand, Agent Tryla."

"Neither should you." Her heart raced. She was investing way too much energy in arguing with this man. Just stick to the case, work it out and move on.

"I will take you to the Embassy," he declared with imperious finality. "You will speak to whom you wish, go as you please. Nothing will be denied you."

"How generous of you," said Tryla with maximum contempt. What was this guy's story? A moment ago he had been dispassionate as ice and now she felt like he was cracking the ground beneath her feet, opening a chasm, a volcano.

Or maybe that wasn't him at all, but her.

One thing was certain, this man who had just given her free access to the Embassy of the Empire of Vhrazhia did not sound like a mere agent with bosses to answer to like Chief Sonyago. It was more like the embassy was his personal property.

Was this a characteristic of the VISS, a mark of arrogance or was it something else?

She had a feeling she would learn a lot more watching him interact with his fellow Vhrazhians.

Truth be told, this curiosity on her part to see him in his element was part of why she wanted to start her investigation at the Embassy. There was another reason, too, and that was to establish immediately her equality with him. She would be damned if he would order her about on her own planet as if she were some kind of lackey.

Nor would he treat her like a toy for his personal amusement. She would resist his good looks, his obvious dynamism and whatever secret chemical attacks he might make on her body. At present, she was holding her own, tamping down the urge to touch and caress, to strip him bare, pressing her naked body everywhere along his.

And she would continue to hold it down.

This was war and she did not intend to lose.

"One rule before we leave," she declared. "I drive the air car. Always."

Vharhin pursed his lips—hot and dry like the desert world he hailed from. Such pride, at once repulsive and oddly magnetic.

"On Vhrazhia, I hold a Class One Star Pilot license and the rank of Fleet Captain in the Imperial Star Force."

"That's great," she tossed back. "Here on Erth, in my air car you hold the rank of Passenger First Class with full control of seat adjustments."

His face hardened. The expression made granite look soft and soggy as Minelian mush stalks. "Agent Tryla, would you mind telling me why you insist on making this relationship so difficult to consummate?"

Consummate...the word passed through her like an energy coil, springing down the length of her spine.

"I'm not consummating anything with you," she said fiercely. "So don't even think about it. And while we're at it, you can forget about fooling me with that ridiculous pheromone of yours or whatever it is. I don't feel a damn thing and I'm not going to."

"That's because I'm not using it," he said.

Tryla's heart skipped a beat. If he wasn't using it, why was she so hot and bothered, her nipples tight, her pussy throbbing? By the ten planets of the Erth Federation, what would happen to her if he did use it?

"What are you saying?" she demanded.

"A Vhrazhian male releases his heat only in the presence of his chosen mate."

"Lucky her," Tryla quipped.

"I have no mate," he told her.

Tryla's pulse raced. This conversation should not be happening. "I am sure I don't care. You ride shotgun and that's final."

"You would not do well on my planet," he informed her.

"Thanks for the compliment," she said, heading off down the corridor, her boots clicking on the smooth, glasslike surface.

Once again he was following. She probably took that as a sign of victory but she would do well to remember that it wasn't only the weak who followed but predators too...as they hunted their quarry.

Chapter Two

Though she would never admit it, Tryla secretly thrilled at the sight below their small air car. The Vhrazhian Embassy was indeed a piece of Vhrazhia, just as Vharhin had said. The compound was surrounded by a semi-opaque energy dome of the same golden amber color as Vharhin's eyes. It occurred to Tryla as they approached in the air car just how remarkable an event this was. Few Erthers had been to this domain and likely they were all male.

As much as she disapproved of their practices and Vharhin's part in them, she could appreciate what it probably took for him to allow her into this world. The air car was allowed to penetrate. A brief flash of light was followed by an emergence into a thoroughly alien sky.

It must have been a miniature version of their planet, she thought. The sky was clear, or at least she assumed it was. Down below was a red, dusty surface, crags and canyons crisscrossing the landscape. She noted a few purple, bulbous objects—a kind of mushroom, perhaps?—and a green and brown creature, crawling like a snake but with a tall, spiky ridge down its back.

"Is he on the Embassy payroll?" Tryla quipped.

"That is a ghrushi," said Vharhin. "They are common on Vhrazhia Prime and most of our colonies as well. They are akin to your snakes, I suppose, though they are much older than Erth dinosaurs."

"Didn't your planet's species evolve?"

Vharhin smiled from the passenger seat. Tryla was caught off guard by the look on his face—almost playful, sly but not smug—the look of a man who might not take himself or life so entirely seriously after all. "This is a matter of debate among my people. Some say that we have been too concerned with preserving things in a certain way and that we must adapt, like you humans. Others say that will be the end of civilization as we know it."

Tryla considered. She was not one for philosophical debate. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," she said. "That's a good Erth saying for you."

"I will remember. If you would kindly set the air car down there, in that open space," he said, pointing.

Tryla noted the location, approximately one and a half kilometers away, though she was partially distracted by his presence. The air car was small, especially when shared with a Greek god, a statue carved from Vhrazhian stone. He was warming up now, just a little.

She, on the other hand, was more than warmed up.

Was the stupid testosterone, or whatever he had, getting to her? She kept thinking about licking his skin. She wanted to taste every millimeter of him. She wanted to follow him. She wanted to crawl over the seat and tear at his clothing and mount him, guiding his red-hot alien dick inside her, until she was stuffed.

One breath and she would orgasm. She wouldn't need to move, not a single thrust.

Tryla moved to hit the landing button and brushed his thigh. Immediate energy transfer, heat slamming through her. She was weak...

"Tryla, not that far."

She woke from her reverie, having overshot the designated landing area. "I know. I was just checking out that area over there."

"That's not a good idea," he said.

"Why?" she demanded, deciding this would be another good time to assert her feminine independence.

"Because," he smiled slantedly, and this time he was definitely playing with her, "you are about to smash into the invisibility shield with cloaks the Ambassadorial Palace."

Tryla's mouth dropped open. Immediately she pulled back on the controls, taking them to a vertical attitude. A series of pops and sputters along the underside of the air car as they skimmed up the hidden wall indicated it had been a close call indeed.

"Good piloting," he praised as she leveled off, soaring once again in the glowing golden sky.

Tryla wasn't in the mood for making friends and she certainly did not want any male approval. "You might have told me sooner," she snapped.

"I might have," he agreed. "But I felt obliged to return the favor."

"What favor? What are you talking about?"

"Back in your chief's office, you gave me a splendid opportunity to stare death in the face. Now you have felt the same. Exhilarating, is it not?"

"Fuck you," said Tryla.

He was looking out the front view screen, that look still on his face. Oh, how she would love to smack it off him. "I am glad you are with security," he observed. "And not your planet's diplomatic corps. We would never have had peace if you were."

"We don't have peace, Vharhin. We are taking a break from hostilities." She set the silver, sharp-edged air car down on tripod legs, footpads resting on chunks of Vhrazhian sandstone. Were they imported or artificially made?

Tryla turned off the engines—one, two, three—silencing the low, vibrating hum of extrastellar energy. She had made the mistake of trying to see something human in him. She would not do it again.

Vharhin's response was measured, careful, with a several second delay. "You speak from passion, Tryla. That is a good thing...in its place."

"I'll show you something in its place." Tryla would be damned if this male was going to patronize her anymore.

She drew her weapon, ready to give him another dose of staring down death. This time he did not remain still. Lightning-fast, he separated the gun from her hand.

A moment later he had the barrel of the needle gun aimed at her, the exquisitely sharp energy release tip pointed directly at her breast.

Tryla didn't flinch. *Today is a good day to die. Isn't that the old saying?* "I'm not apologizing to you," she said proudly. "And I'm not begging for my life, so pull the trigger if you want."

Her hand was still smarting from his sudden attack. Vharhin was obviously strong, fast and one hell of a fighter.

"I would be disappointed if you did," he said.

With that, he took her hand, palm upward, and placed the pistol in it. His eyes burned into hers.

She gave it right back.

"Save your anger," he told her. "For the enemy."

"You...are the enemy," she whispered.

And then he was kissing her, leaning across, lip to lip, their hands clenched, holding the gun...together.

Vharhin did the impossible as he pulled Tryla close, his free hand behind her neck, feeling her soft skin, the silk of her knotted hair. She moaned in protest as he sealed their mouths, drawn into her as though she were sun and he moon. This was not the Vhrazhian way of things. She was the wrong female—the most wrong female in the universe—for him personally.

But Tryla tasted good, she was interesting and fascinating and different and beautiful...and he was hard and throbbing for her in the way he should be only for his chosen one, his intended mate in his betrothal bed.

Vharhin felt another taste upon his lips, namely the pheromones released by a male in heat, the biochemicals used for enslaving the will and body of the female.

He was taking her for his own.

By the ancestors, where was his sacred discipline? He wanted to possess this woman, take her as if they were two animals, no propriety, no responsibility. Was he some Erth male, barely separated from the ways of beasts? The Vhrazhians had been erecting palaces and temples when the humans were mere specks of possibility in the primal soup. So they had Johnny Come Lately technology and had leaped ahead in a few areas—they were still in need of true housebreaking.

And this one...this one here was the most barbaric of all. She knew nothing of being a female. She ran around like a male pointing weapons. She needed to be taught, teased into submission and made to beg in a soft voice for her lord's attention. The female

lived to please the male, the male lived to protect the female—that was the way of things.

Was he so blinded during his short time on Erth, so lost among the alien, primitive cylinders and spires, the milling crowds and wandering masses, no roots, no moorings, their identities born of their momentary lusts—rich food to fill the belly, pleasure blips to bathe the eyes and a million other diversions.

No, it was more, it was deeply personal. It was Tryla.

Her lips felt good against his—full and solid. He could rip her clothes off and make love to her in this air car. Did the seats recline? Their limbs would entangle, she would grab at him, she would pull him close, and then she would fight, only to pull him all the closer. And he would want her, more and more and more.

It would be war.

They were bonded already, his people and hers. Civilizations did not fight unless there were things in common, things at stake. Reflections, painfully beheld in each other's mirrors.

There was so much the Erthwoman did not understand about the conflict, about his people. About him.

He released her.

For a split second, she sighed, wanting more, her mouth shaped into pure seductive need, her nipples peaked beneath her skintight uniform. Her scent—the faint meadow smell—mixed with something muskier, the odor of her heat.

Tensing, he waited for possible reaction to the pheromones she had absorbed through his lips. Would she display the helpless arousal of a Vhrazhian woman, her will completely succumbing to her need for his touch?

“Vharhin...” She whispered his name. Something was there in her eyes.

Instantly it changed, her eyes cleared and she snapped back to reality. She stood tall, a picture of discipline. A lesser woman would have moved to slap him. Had she done so, he would have intercepted the blow by grasping her wrist.

Tryla, however, was not a lesser woman.

She was an agent, trained in combat, fearless.

Faster than lightning, her fingers went to his throat, index and thumb digging into his flesh. If he were human, his life would have hung in the balance.

“Touch me again,” she hissed, “and it will be the last thing that ever happens in your miserable vooz existence.”

“Insults won’t affect me. Neither will blows to my trachea. It is composed of a far more absorbent material than your own. May I suggest—”

“Never mind,” she snarled. “When I want you dead you will be dead. Let’s just get this investigation over with. The sooner you get back to your own solar system, the better.”

Tryla pushed the button—or, more accurately, smashed her finger into the dashboard—to open the air car doors.

Vharhin caught himself in a moment of affection for the Erthwoman. She was trying so hard to be angry but she was obviously attracted to him. Females didn't really have a choice where Vhrazhian males were concerned. It put them at a disadvantage but it was purely biological. Once it had been a matter of survival to have the females completely loyal and keen on the sort of attention that would lead to reproduction. Now it was a matter of culture, but like everything else Vhrazhian, it had become enshrined, an institution...unquestionable.

Women and men had their places. Women were to be beautiful, obedient and treasured. They did not have careers, they did not find missing persons. Tryla's approach was not a male one, certainly not a Vhrazhian one, though, he had to admit, it might have merit. He was put slightly off balance by her reasoning. It would not have occurred to him to get in anyone's mind as she put it or to begin from a position of maximum skepticism, ruling out possibilities.

Did he have innate prejudices when it came to the case? Was his thinking too rigidly? Might he miss something crucial left to his own devices? It did not help that he was not the well-seasoned investigating agent he had been presented as by his government. Personally, he would have chosen another. But the decision was a political one.

Ultimately, to be blunt, the life of the ambassador was of little import. He was a servant of the Empire and he would be expected to die or live accordingly.

Peace mattered. And there were those who opposed peace. Would he be able to trust Tryla enough to reveal more of the truth?

He would not have imagined that prior to kissing her.

That was a foolish means of building a bond of trust to be sure. Male to male, it would have no meaning. But Tryla was not male and much as he wished to treat her as one, his body screamed out her differences...and his need to immerse himself in them.

Nazhlan, the ambassador's chief of staff, was approaching the air car. It was a fortunate thing he had not been closer or that the air car's view screen was not more transparent. Had the kiss been seen, the situation would have been greatly complicated.

Nazhlan, his head smoothly shaved, his stocky body cloaked in the brown robes of office, offset with gold trim and a red sash, bowed before Vharhin. The exact depth of the bow was measured in millimeters. At his level, he would be expected to show literally hundreds of forms of acknowledgement and obeisance, depending on the rank and situation of the other.

Nazhlan was giving him his due as an officer of the Imperial Security Service. These were considered parallel tracks to some extent and their positions were roughly equal, though one might outrank the other in a given context. Much depended on the home turf and the particular role of each at the moment.

Had Nazhlan been aware of Vharhin's true identity, of course, it would have been a very different situation.

Vharhin also bowed with a straightness and smoothness born of a lifetime's practice. "Tizh-y'al," he offered in greeting.

The ambassador's assistant straightened, a look of satisfaction on his small, angular face. The Erthwoman would never grasp the subtleties of the interchange, the fact that Vharhin had spoken the standard greeting first was an acknowledgement on his part that in this situation, he was to assume a slightly less dominant role.

For Vhrazhians, all interactions were power exchanges. A man could spend his entire life clawing and grappling to gain a millimeter on the pecking order of bows or the right to a certain sash or a particular flick of the eyes from one of the nobility.

"Tizh-y'al, Officer," said Nazhlan, his faint accent marking him as a denizen of the Northern Desert of Vhrazhia Prime. "I see that you have come in an Erth conveyance."

Vharhin spoke to Nazhlan in Vhrazhian. There was a rich subtext here, a note of minor disapproval for his not having teleported here instead of directly to ErthSec Headquarters. This maneuver, though mildly inappropriate, had been necessary to avoid Nazhlan or anyone else discovering exactly where he had beamed from on Vhrazhia.

Nazhlan was also making a roundabout reference to his bringing a human, a female, no less, into the Imperial domain.

For matters to proceed judiciously, it was crucial that Vharhin neither apologize for his actions nor appear to be forcing the matter. The ensuing discussion would last an hour at least, as Nazhlan sought to stake out ground for himself, as a male and a servant of the emperor.

In the end, both men would save face and they would be allowed to proceed with business.

Tryla, however, had different ideas. "How about you two shoot the breeze on somebody else's credits? Or am I the only one noticing that the clock is rolling?"

Nazhlan drew back his lips in a look of pure effrontery. "Officer," he said in perfect, unaccented Erthspeak. "May I suggest you return this pet to its rightful owner?"

Tryla's reaction was predictable and instantaneous. "And may I suggest, you pompous windbag, that you —"

"Tryla, enough!" Vharhin cut her off sharply, grasping her by the upper arms, face-to-face, thereby blocking Nazhlan from her view and vice versa.

She glared venomously, her eyes on fire with flashing emerald lights. He pulled her close to whisper the bottom line. "Do this my way or you'll get nothing."

Tryla frowned but stopped her fussing.

He released her. "Honorable Nazhlan," said Vharhin, cutting to the chase. "The extraordinary disappearance of His Excellency requires extraordinary flexibility. Such

imbalance requires us to work with the Erthers. This female is an investigator. On this world, this is her place."

Nazhlan raised his head like the emperor himself. "This is not Erth. This is Vhrazhia."

He said the word like a prayer, a chant to the heavens.

Vharhin knew his people's arrogance would one day be their undoing.

Whether it was Tryla's influence or the wider influence of being on this new world, Vharhin found himself dispensing with further niceties. "Yes, Nazhlan, you have a nice little bubble to live in, filled with Vhrazhian air. In case you haven't noticed, however, outside is Erth. May I count on your cooperation or shall I contact those who sent me? And I assure you they will be less patient than I."

Nazhlan's burnt umber face went a shade paler. "At your service." He bowed stiffly, attempting to save face. "Your command is my will, your will my heartbeat."

"I serve by your grace," Vharhin replied formulaically. Turning to Tryla, he said, "You may ask your questions."

She rolled her eyes at the formality. "Tell me, when was the last time you saw the ambassador?" she asked Nazhlan.

Nazhlan's face was pinched in discomfort. "Yesterday evening," he said, addressing Vharhin. "He took his normal supper and retired to his chambers for the night."

"He obviously didn't retire," Tryla said, showing little tact. "Witnesses saw a transport bubble, his personal one, leave here shortly after dark."

"The ambassador retired," said Nazhlan stubbornly. "As he does each night. He completed his supper, he dined upon shellfish and marmox, all quite regular."

"This morning he wasn't here," said Tryla. "Is that regular too?"

Nazhlan was clearly struggling to maintain equilibrium. Vharhin sympathized. Tryla was a one-woman destabilization force.

"I can show you the menu," said Nazhlan to Vharhin.

"How about if you show us the ambassador's bedroom instead?" Tryla said.

Both men stared wordlessly at her.

Vharhin fought to keep his heartbeat steady, his pulse within healthy norms. The Erthwoman could not have complicated things any more had she tried. "May I ask why?" he inquired.

"No," she replied. "You may not. Unless you want us to waste more time than you already have with your ridiculous male ego games."

Vharhin sighed, accepting that there was no fighting his partner at the moment. He spoke to Nazhlan, bracing himself as he repeated the request in Vhrazhian.

The ambassador's chief of staff showed a slight wince, which in Erth terms would have been the equivalent of screaming bloody murder. A Vhrazhian's inner chambers

were taboo. That was the place where his mate dwelled...and where he shared his sexual self.

"This had better be pertinent to the investigation," Vharhin said, falling in beside her as Nazhlan walked ahead, out of earshot.

"Like I'd have any other reason. You think it gives me a thrill to get any closer to your sordid personal lives than I have to?"

The tweak in her voice made his blood hot. He wanted to pull her into his arms, kiss her into moans, until she begged to be taken. And then he would make her wait...for as long as they could both stand it.

Chapter Three

Tryla was trying to look unimpressed, casual, even a tiny bit bored.

But the fact was, she had never seen anything so amazing in her life. This world within a world.

The door materialized out of thin air, obviously the result of Vhrazhian dimensional technology. It appeared to be made of obsidian, a tall, black, sliding stone, carved to a point. Over three meters high, easily. Inside, the floor was red, made of stone as smooth as marble but with a kind of sheen to it like rubies. The color changed as she walked over it, to a kind of amber glow around her feet.

The chamber was enormous, several stories high. The ceiling was composed of gems in various earth tones. Those too seemed to shift colors as she walked. Most fascinating were the walls. At first glance the huge figures appeared to be still but they were actually in slow motion. Warriors in ancient armor battling fabulous monsters, a couple in an embrace on a cloud, an erupting volcano, a rocket spinning about a planet.

A living picture of Vhrazhian history. No furniture, though. Obviously this was not a sitting room. Vharhin took hold of her arm. She was about to fight him off but decided to trust his lead.

She hated doing that but she needed him. She would appear subservient, if necessary, but it was an act and she would make that painfully clear to him later.

The fact that she felt heat in her body—burning hot on her arms when he had grabbed her outside and again now—was irrelevant. The fact that he had kissed her was irrelevant. He had proven he was an uncouth barbarian and she had proven she could give it right back. So much for his supposed sex powers.

Okay, so she was wet. That was just plain old lust. Take it or leave it.

In this case, she would leave it. No man had ever told her to be quiet before. What a huge turn-off. She wasn't one of his little slaves he could order around.

But what if she were to end up under his power, if she had no option but to respond, purely as her body dictated—to offer up her painfully sensitive breasts, to part her legs for penetration, to say yes to a kiss, to anything he wanted?

The kiss had been unusual, she had to admit. Vharhin did not taste like a human male. His lips were hotter and drier and they tasted vaguely of rum.

She would definitely have liked more.

Though she could certainly resist if she had to.

Did it have something to do with the pheromones she had heard about?

"Ask your questions through me," he whispered. "And don't look him in the eye anymore."

Why not? she wanted to snap back. *Is the big, tough diplomat afraid the little female will put the whammy on him?* What a joke. What more proof did she need that this male supremacy stuff was a total fraud perpetrated by insecure males.

Vharhin's not insecure though, is he? she thought sardonically as they moved into the ambassador's bedroom.

She nearly gasped at the sight of it. The room was the size of four or five Erth living compartments put together. The shape was circular, with a decorated, gem-inlaid dome. The floor was soft underneath, cushiony. Everything was in a subtle purple color, somewhere between violet and deep purple. The bed was round, almost like a seashell with a purple mattress set inside.

She looked for dressers, nightstands, evidence of anything personal.

It might as well have been a furniture showroom at a Vhrazhian shopping dome. One thing caught her eye.

"The ambassador was into bondage."

"Into what?" Vharhin asked.

She pointed to the coiled silky purple ropes on the bed. "I don't think those are shoelaces, unless he had some damn big feet."

Nazhrah was making strange little noises, as if she didn't already know how upset he was about her being there.

"Those are love ties," said Vharhin, as if she ought to have figured out the significance on her own. "The ambassador is mated."

Suddenly it clicked. "I should have figured that tying up your women is standard practice. Keeps them from escaping, right?"

"To be ritually bound by one's sahvral is the sign of ultimate acceptance and trust. It occurs only in the most mature relationships," he explained. "It is an art form of adornment, not any crude containment device."

Tryla imagined those ropes on her naked flesh, her bare body slithering across that plushy, velvety-soft mattress...and Vharhin behind her, helping her into place, securing her wrists and ankles, making her his.

"Whatever." She rolled her eyes. "You say love ties, I say human rights violation. Tell me, Vharhin, why wasn't there anything on the blip about the ambassador having a mate? Isn't she here on Erth?"

"She is in the next room," Vharhin dropped a bombshell. "But she is not a part of this investigation."

Tryla lost it. "Damn it, Vharhin, stop deciding all on your own what's a part of things and what isn't. For one thing, it's unfair to me as your partner, for another, you're doing a crappy job of it. This is the man's mate, right, his most intimate associate? How could she not know things to help us?"

Nazhlan was shaking his head, mumbling, — a curse probably.

"Hey, diplomat!" She gave it to him between the eyes. "If you have something to say, have some balls and say it to my face."

Nazhlan looked like he was going to have apoplexy.

Vharhin said something to him and he walked out of the room.

"What's he going to do? Go to his room and cry?" Tryla asked.

"No," said Vharhin. "He is going to call his superior, Lord Fhirvhi, the Minister of State."

She frowned slightly. "Oh. Is that bad?"

"It's not good, Tryla. Now are we done in here or would you like to inspect the ambassador's undergarments?"

"No," said Tryla, unflappable. "But I would like to interview his mate."

Vharhin's eyes widened. "You would like to...what?"

Just when Vharhin thought she was out of ways to shock him...

"I want to talk to the woman," she said, as though it was nothing at all. "I assume she knows how to or aren't your females taught to speak?"

"Our females speak quite well," he replied, straightening to his full height as defender of his race. "They are among our finest musicians and artists and poets, in fact. What they are not, however, is open to prodding and poking by criminal investigators."

"Hah," said Tryla. "I knew we'd get to this sooner or later. It's the classic double standard. Pay lip service and elevate them as too pure for public life, meanwhile they are being put on a shelf like dolls."

Vharhin's jaw tensed. One of these times, he would take off the kid gloves and give back some arguments. If she thought her precious Erth culture was so wonderful and good, she was sorely mistaken. "This is not going to be negotiated," he said. "It is a grave dishonor that I should ever be in the presence of another man's mate. Do not ask it of me. Ever."

Tryla blinked, sizing him up. She must have sensed she had reached his limit. She did not run and hide, however. "Let me talk to her, then."

He shook his head. "Out of the question."

"I'm an alien, I know, but I'm female and hey, according to that clown who just left I'm on par with cats and dogs. What insult is that to the woman? I'm just a little kitten going in to say hi."

Vharhin snorted. "You're a lot of things but a kitten isn't one of them."

"Fine, but I am desperate."

"I can see that. But why? You know this partnership thing works both ways. You have to open up to me. Give me some clue what you are after and then I can back you."

She pursed her lips. "That's fair."

Did her lips still taste of him? he wondered. *Was she thinking of another kiss?*

He had not expected such quick assent and fought to absorb its meaning. Clearly equilibrium mattered to Tryla – the internal balance of right and wrong. The individual within oneself first, then to one's fellow men and the women in one's charge and finally to the whole of society.

Except she wasn't supposed to think like a man, she was supposed to find her balance, her being, by attaching to a male who would love and protect her.

"Look, Vharhin, I'll be the first to admit I don't know how your people think. You're not quite the war-mongering animal I expected, okay?"

"Thanks for the compliment."

"Don't hold your breath for more. Like I said, I can't claim that you have human motivations. But you can't be that different. You kissed me and you enjoyed it. Hell, maybe we Erthwomen are some kind of a challenge. You Vhrazhian males are wrapped pretty tight, you and this other dude, both. In my experience, where males are concerned, they want three things – power, pussy and credits.

"Usually one comes in the course of things and they parley it into the others. A stud uses sex to get money, a politician or dip tries to get rich off his position, get laid a lot or both. Are your dips rich?"

Vharhin sighed. "Leaving aside the vulgarity of your remarks and the extreme insults to my race, I will answer your questions. Ambassador Yalkheniy would not have wanted for any financial resources. At his level of public service, the emperor showers a man generously. It is considered a matter of the emperor's pride."

"So that leaves sex."

Vharhin could not have imagined a discussion like this, even a day ago. "I really can't accept that, Tryla. I know the ambassador and he is concerned with his function and that is all. This position is one of the most important in the Empire. Do you think the emperor would choose lightly?"

"I have no clue. If he's like the bosses on Erth, though, he would almost certainly choose for the wrong reasons. Politicians want to look good, so they care about appearances."

"Not this emperor." Vharhin tried to keep his response neutral. The last thing he wanted was Tryla snooping into his relationship to the royal family.

"Anyway..." He attempted to redirect her. "We should be considering the most obvious motive, which is to cause trouble and get the war started again. The ambassador is a pawn, is he not?"

"Maybe, but it's still got sex. I can smell it. It might have some unusual twist but it's there. Let me talk to the mate. I can get us somewhere."

"You do realize there is no precedent for this in the three-hundred-thousand-year existence of the monarchy?"

"Great, we'll have an etherbeer later and celebrate," she quipped, obviously unimpressed.

He shook his head. "I fear I shall live to regret this."

"We have to try," she said. "Because if another war starts, we might not live at all."

Vharhin walked her to the door to the chambers of the ambassador's sahvria. "I will wait for you here," he said, his hand on the knob.

"How do you know she's even in there?" Tryla wondered. "What if she doesn't want any company?"

"Her sahvral is missing," he stated, with the confidence born of that same three hundred thousand years of Imperial precedence. "She will be accessible."

The room was dark. The door creaked and for a moment Tryla felt fear. She didn't belong here, she was intruding. There was something sacred at work, more noble and breathtaking than the larger than life ambassadorial chamber with its icicle roof or the man's gargantuan bedroom.

"Hello?" Tryla's voice barely broke a whisper.

She had forgotten to ask if the woman spoke Erther or not.

"Is there anyone here?"

"On the pillow," came a reply. "I wait..."

Tryla's eyes adjusted. Black, silklike material completely shrouded the kneeling woman. The pillow she spoke of was beneath her knees and calves. It rested in the very center of the room.

It was a small room, a manageable size.

"I am Agent Tryla of Erth Security. I am heading — co-heading — the investigation to find your...to find the ambassador."

"I knew you would come," she said, her voice sweet and melodious, of a strain so pure one could barely imagine it carrying through ordinary, unrarified air.

"Me...personally?" Tryla could almost believe the woman was psychic, like some kind of elegant, ancient gypsy.

"One like you," she said. "I did hope for it."

Tryla did not know what to make of that. "It's not usual, I understand, for you to speak with...strangers?"

"I have spoken to no one but my sahvral and his servants for well nigh the passing of a thousand Vhrazhian moons," she declared.

"That's a long time."

"Ten of your Erth years."

"You must be lonely?" It came out a question, though Tryla had meant it to be a militant statement.

"There are a thousand million kinds of loneliness," said the sahvria. "One for each living creature. I am loved and honored. I am moon to a sun. Could a female ask for more?"

Yes, Tryla wanted to scream. She could ask for the right to go to school, to fly an air car, reprogram her uncle's serving droids to wrestle for the other kids in the collective.

"I have some questions. They will help in the investigation."

"I don't have the kind of answers you are looking for."

"You don't know what the questions are." Tryla did not want to be impatient with this poor creature but it wasn't going to be easy.

"If my sahvral is not found..." her voice trailed off.

"We are going to do our best."

"His brother would inherit me. He already has a sahvria. My status would be lowered."

"Why don't you seek asylum on Erth?" Tryla realized immediately she had made a mistake. "I'm sorry," she said. "This isn't my business."

"Your heart is good. I am not offended."

"Well, that certainly makes you a lot more mature than the Vhrazhian males I've met. So tell me, did your husband have enemies?"

"Agent Tryla, would you turn on that light? There is a lever on the wall."

Tryla did so, bathing the small chamber in a golden hue, the same color as the artificial sky surrounding the building. The room was round, the walls were decorated with paintings. A kind of antique metal spinning wheel – wheels within wheels – sat in the corner.

"You painted these?" She looked in admiration at the sea- and sky-scapes, all of them depicting the natural environs of Erth. In one there was a depiction of the sunset over the Capricorn Dome, the main enclosure over the Erth's capital city in which this very embassy was located.

Still other paintings depicted scenes within the city. The central floating forest, which was just above the cylinders of the financial district. Some were of small-scale businesses and entertainment centers located in the lower areas, in what was known as the hyper-steel nest of dwellings.

"Yes. They are done from descriptions my sahvral has shared with me. Are they accurate to your Erth eye?"

Tryla was stunned. "They are as good as engrams. It's unbelievable."

"Thank you." The woman's head remained lowered, maintaining her position of humility. Tryla wanted to haul her to her feet and rip off that veil.

"This chamber, Agent, is my world and the visions I put on my canvases," she explained. "I know nothing of my mate's enemies or his friends. That is his world...not a female's world."

Tryla might as well be up against a hyper-steel wall. "Did you notice anything unusual in his behavior of late?"

"No. He is always the same to me."

"When did you see him last?"

"An hour or so before he...left."

"And there was nothing unusual? Nothing at all," she pressed. "Please try to remember, the slightest detail could mean everything."

She shook her head. "Always the same."

"Thank you for your time," said Tryla. A good cop knew when to back off. If there was anything here, she'd already gotten it. Later it might come to her.

"I have nothing," said the woman, "*but* time."

Tryla had nothing to offer in reply.

"Agent, may I prevail upon you to turn the light off on your way out? I am in a state of mourning. It is...complex."

"Certainly. And thank you."

* * * * *

"Well?" Vharhin was all over her as soon as she returned to the main bedroom.

"We have a problem," Tryla told him.

"I'm not sure how we could have any more at this point," he said.

"Oh, it's a problem," she repeated. "Your precious lady in there? The flower of perfect Vhrazhian womanhood? Well, she's lying. And I don't mean polite little white lies. I'm talking big, ugly lies."

"Impossible," he said, issuing his typical shoot-from-the-hip denial.

"You know, Vharhin, if just once you would wait and hear me out before you shoot my ideas down, it would be nice."

"Maybe it's not me," he said with distinct irritation in his voice. "Maybe your ideas just don't fly. Ever think of that?"

"Careful." She winked. "You're starting to sound human."

"Perish the thought," he grumbled. "Please tell me we are leaving."

"Not yet. I want to talk to Nazhlan's mate."

"He doesn't have one. Sorry to deprive you of a chance at another diplomatic incident."

"Why doesn't he have one? Is that unusual?"

"Not for one in his class."

"What class?"

"Nazhlan is what you would call a eunuch."

Her brow shot up. "You have to be kidding me? You people are living like the Arabian Nights or something."

"The Path of Enforced Celibacy is noble and ancient," he said, moving into that slightly huffy mode of his, which for some reason, she was finding more and more adorable.

"Blah, blah, blah," she said, still processing her conversation with the sahvria. "Tell me this, Vharhin. The ambassador's mate mentioned becoming a woman of lower status. What did she mean?"

"If a woman is willed to a man already mated she will become his concubine, perhaps one of many."

"And do most men have these concubines?"

"Yes."

"The ambassador included?"

"Actually, no, I do not think so."

Tryla nodded. "I think that's important, Vharhin. I don't know why but I think it is."

"I have no doubt. Are we going to interview the ghrushis now?"

"Careful, Vharhin. If that's a crack about the value of your women—"

"No, it's a crack about your police work."

"You know, I really should have shot you when I had the chance."

"Nobody's perfect," he quipped. "Come on, I will buy you an etherbeer."

"Good heavens, do Vhrazhians actually drink?"

"Among other things."

"Trust me, I don't want to know," she said.

Unfortunately, she did want to know. And the more time they spent together, the more likely she was to find out. What she needed was to find fresh reasons to hate him, hard evidence to back up her beliefs, the operational structure of her universe.

It was the chief's fault. He should never have tricked her into facing with Vharhin. Now he was in her, eating his way deeper and deeper into her consciousness and every time she tried to look out on the world from her solitary fortress, there he was inside, looking out with her.

More often than not he was grabbing her too...and kissing her silly.

She decided to have an etherbeer. It might clear her head. Either that or anesthetize her against any more effects from his Vhrazhian pheromones, which according to Sonya, were capable of acting like alcohol on a woman's system.

So far she had been immune.

Hadn't she?

It wasn't as if the kiss had done anything to her. So she had fantasized, back at the embassy, about being tied down to and made love to by Vharhin. He wasn't entirely unattractive, why should she make a big deal of it?

Granted, she had kissed him in the first place, something one didn't usually do with one's enemies-turned-partners, but this was not a time to quibble. She had the honor of her species to uphold and her gender as well. She would take everything he threw at her and give it right back.

With a vengeance.

"By the way..." She took a moment to confront him as they approached the air car. She was smiling, sweet as Vhrazhian honey. "If you ever tell me to be quiet again I will singlehandedly disassemble you, Vhrazhian molecule from Vhrazhian molecule."

"I shall try not to put you in such a position," he said dryly. "For both our sakes."

Chapter Four

The holonews was not good. The pasty-faced, silver-suited reporter was talking about special maneuvers by Erth's Defense Forces near the Vhrazhian Neutral Zone. "Nothing to be alarmed about," he said, flashing a patently false smile. "Just routine practice for the fleet."

Vharhin was adept enough at politics to read between the lines. Someone at ErthGov was getting nervous about possible Vhrazhian military reaction to the ambassador's disappearance. Maybe there had even been a shakeout among factions, with a victory on the part of the more hawkish elements in ErthDef command.

Certainly there were those in the human leadership who had not wanted peace, just as there were among his own race. Tryla would have voted to keep the war going had it been up for a vote.

He considered this as he studied her beautiful, perfect oval face across the table. She had been distracted since their arrival. Was she aware of the stares he had gotten on the way in, the surreptitious glances from the business-men and -women sipping on their slim drinks, elbows pushed onto smooth, mosaic tabletops?

Vharhin was the outsider here. Hatred had only recently receded back to fear and then mild curiosity. All too easily it could swing the other way.

His ears burned from the hum of Erth talk, too complexly layered to follow. Such an imprecise, inefficient language. And all those bodies, lazily sitting or leaning against the wooden bar, so little discipline, so little direction.

He really wished he could find out what was going on across the Zone on his side. Unfortunately, the Vhrazhians did not have a media, let alone a free one. Information was jealously guarded, from the emperor on down. The whole of the fleet could be headed here right now and he wouldn't know it.

There was one sure way to learn the truth, of course, but that would destroy his cover entirely. The communication channels he would need to use would almost certainly be monitored. And at this point, sensitive as things were, his very identity might be a pretext for war in the minds of some.

"So what's your best guess at this point, Sherlock?" asked Tryla, delivering the question from across the disk-shaped table, her voice patently teasing and sultry. "Is your man still out there?"

Vharhin couldn't resist. Swallowing a healthy amount of the pale blue etherbeer, he said, "I am surprised my opinion is of any use to you, given your ability to figure out everything by yourself."

"It's not important. I just want to be able to rule things out—starting with anything you think is possible."

"Very funny," he said.

"If it's so funny, why aren't you laughing?"

"Vhrazhians don't laugh."

"I should have guessed." She pulled the tie from her hair. Shaking her head, she let loose the chestnut tresses. His heart exploded on the spot. Visions of her in his arms, beneath him on a bed of mating, smothered by his kisses...bound.

"What?" she demanded.

He frowned. He had been staring at her, completely oblivious of his poor manners. "Nothing."

"Don't tell me nothing, you just looked at me like I'm on the menu for dinner."

"You would be," he said, all sense of reserve dissolving. "If I were an Erthman."

Her eyes darkened briefly. Was she surprised by his remark? Not half as surprised as he was by his own reaction. This should not be happening between them. His biology was encoded to interact with females of his own kind. The more deeply he was attracted to her the more he would crave to conquer her.

For her part she might well find herself under the influence of his pheromones, helplessly enthralled.

He had to get a handle on the situation, fast.

"Really," she drawled. "And I would turn you down flat."

"You mean you like me better as a Vhrazhian?"

"Nope. I mean I'd reject you no matter what you were."

He drained his glass. His tongue was beyond loose, it had become downright dangerous. "Still want my opinion on the ambassador?" He tried to change to a safe subject.

"I'm all ears."

And lips and cheeks and brilliant, sultry eyes and hands and breasts...

"I think he was kidnapped by the pro-war party, on your planet or mine."

She held up her hand, signaling for a servodroid. A silver cylinder floated over. Emitting a beam at each of their glasses it refilled them, generating the etherbeer at a molecular level.

"Then why haven't they produced some ransom note, some evidence that he's met with foul play? Better yet, why not kill him and dump the body? Make some claim from an obscure group, pin the thing on somebody? This is all too vague."

He pointed to the screen. "Those warships of yours aren't vague."

"They aren't my warships," she said sharply. "Any more than the ones on your side are yours."

If you only knew, he thought.

"We both follow orders, Vharhin. We aren't politicians."

"Wow! That's a first."

"What?"

"You're actually identifying something in common between us."

"Don't read into it. This is what it is."

"And what is it, exactly?" he asked.

She pursed her lips. "If you're trying to be coy, forget it. There isn't anything personal here. We're partners and that's it."

He shook his head. "You fight me way too much, which means your emotions are involved."

"What are you, an Erth psychologist?" she snapped.

He captured her hand—warm and vital. Was it the etherbeer or did he really feel it, the bond? No one else knew what they did. Everything rested on their shoulders. "Tell me you feel nothing when I do this."

She didn't pull away. "Vharhin, don't..."

He squeezed her fingers. "I felt something when I kissed you, Tryla, if I did not say this, I would be less than a male."

"Bully for you and your clean conscience. Now let go of my hand."

"You need only pull away from me," he pointed out.

She did so, annoyed. "Maybe in the VISS you take time out of investigations to flirt. At ErthSec, we stick to business."

His heart was racing and his cock was harder than it had ever been in his life. He felt the beads of sweat on his forehead, the dryness in his mouth. Was he entering into the mating heat? If so, they were both in trouble. "This has everything to do with the investigation," he said. "You are enflaming me and it must stop."

"I am doing no such thing!" She blushed even as her eyes turned to pure fire.

"You are tempting me as a female, advertising your desirability and physical charms."

She leaned forward. "Listen, bud, just because we're in public doesn't mean I won't shoot you."

"If you push me hard enough, Tryla, I will take you, put you to my pleasure. Because of the chemicals my body releases through the pores of my skin and through my cum you might well end up as my sexual slave."

She glared at him. "You are totally fucking deluded."

"And you have erect nipples. You're aroused, Tryla."

Tryla pointed a finger. "You're going to get a grip, Vharhin, and you're going to do it now. If I make you all hot and bothered that is your problem. Maybe you shouldn't

have kissed me, huh? My own body and its reactions are my business. If I am excited, which I'm not, it has nothing to do with you. So if you want some kind of release, you should run right over to the Comfort Zone—there are plenty of Erthwomen there to help you with that problem."

"You do not understand Vhrazhian physiology. We are designed to key into a single female for life. The Comfort Zone is for empty sex, something I am neither capable of nor interested in. There must be a connection with the female and that is something I can ill afford with you or anyone else on this planet."

Her gaze narrowed but not in anger. "What did you say?"

"I said I can ill afford a connection. Why?"

"Before that, though, you said there had to be a connection for Vhrazhians to have sex, right?"

"Yes. What are you driving at?"

"I have it," she said, her beautiful face lit up in a way that warmed his heart and sent stabs of need through his belly. "I know where the ambassador went."

Vharhin was about ten steps behind. "How could you know that? What have you figured out?"

Tryla rose to her feet, lithe and confident as she slipped her credit tab into the slot on the table to pay for the etherbeers.

"You'll find out. We have to go to the Comfort Zone right now. There isn't a moment to lose."

Vharhin took hold of her arm. He could not let the moment pass without contact, some small token to slake his growing thirst for her flesh.

Damn the pheromones. Or was something else going on, something associated with his heart as well as his blood?

"Didn't you hear me? I said we haven't a moment to lose."

"We can spare one moment," he said. "For this..."

Tryla was pulled against Vharhin's chest. Refusing the kiss was not an option. The fate of millions might hinge on her doing the best investigative work of her life tonight but for right now she was a woman—nothing more, nothing less.

Such had been her thinking since he had taken her hand in his. Her blood had heated and her loins had melted. She had demanded he let go of her, but he had been right. She could have pulled away at any point.

Had she wanted to be captured? Did she want it even now?

Vharhin's second kiss was much more informed than the first. He knew her better and it showed. Her strengths, her weaknesses, oh, stars, her whole existence was mirrored against his lips.

She felt her breasts squashed against him, her nipples burning. She sensed that he wanted to make love to her, though she did not know if he was prepared for the price he would pay – the price they would both pay.

Yes, she could easily strip his clothes away and let him do the same to her. She could allow him access to her aching sex, let him plunge in with that Vhrazhian cock. She would stand right here in the damn bar and wrap her ankles around his taut buttocks. She would let him fuck her here in front of all these witnesses. Leaving good Erth citizens aghast as she allowed an alien to have his way with her.

Her brain said stop, but he tasted so good and he was so amazingly tender in the midst of his plundering. She hadn't expected that. This was no generic lust, no random taking, he was taking *her*. She had the distinct feeling he did not want anyone else right now but that couldn't be true. He was Vhrazhian, which meant his biology was keyed toward passive, submissive females. Surely he yearned for a beautiful woman who would cover herself in black and wait on her knees every time he went out for a drink or a game of something or other with his friends, or whatever their men did with their time.

Oh, this was no good at all. One kiss was a fluke but two – two could form a habit. *Mustn't respond*, she thought, but Vharhin was not leaving her a choice. Man to woman, he was closing the portals of her escape, no before or after, no time, no duty, just seduction and yes, she wanted it. Who wouldn't want this kind of powerful sexual attention from a godlike being from a race more legend than reality?

No, no, no, she couldn't go that way. He was Vhrazhian. Vhrazhian! He made slaves. He was in the VISS. The VISS had taken her father and her uncle. For three months she was in an internment camp before being part of a prisoner exchange.

But Vharhin's kiss wasn't evil, it couldn't be. He tasted so much more human already with the scents of the city on him, the faint taste of the metallic, dry etherbeer.

Vharhin's fingers ran through her hair – caressing, soothing, enflaming. What was it with him and the hair? Definitely something.

His cock was hard against her. It must be large, she thought, and thick.

Can't be bad...can't be bad...

Abruptly he let her go. She tried to cling to him like a pitiful, spurned female. He met her with outstretched palms, pushing her away as if she had been the aggressor.

Son of a bitch.

Resorting to behavior very old and very feminine, she slapped him.

He cocked his head, puzzled.

Tryla was disgusted with herself. She felt used, foolish...and hornier than she had ever been in her life.

"Don't say a word," she warned, heading for the door. "Not a fucking word."

Vharhin waited until they were outside. "Tryla, listen to me."

"Didn't you hear what I said?" she spat back at him. "The subject is closed."

"It is closed when I say so. And do not attempt to strike me a second time."

"Or else what?" Her body quivered. She felt like a moth dancing in the flame, wondering how far he would go. "Are you going to truss me up like a sahvria?"

His eyes flashed. "The idea intrigues you. I could tell, back at the embassy. Has an Erthman never done such a thing to you—tied you in bed, put you obediently to his pleasure, releasing your natural feminine submissions?"

Her knees went weak. "I am no more submissive than you."

"Biology would argue that point. To be ready for sex, your gender must open in surrender, lying supine to take the hard, thrusting male."

Her pussy throbbed. "If I want holoporn I will get it on my own so spare me your perverted monologues."

"You do not grasp it, do you?"

"What?"

"That you play with fire. If I release my inhibitions, you will be mine. I will bed you and I will own you."

She held her breath. No human male would ever speak to her like that. None would even dream of such a thing. She was conditioned to rebel against the idea, to loathe it, but a part of her was very, very attracted.

For a moment she allowed herself to imagine the two of them alone in the privacy of a bedchamber, perhaps this very night when their work was done. He would be amazing—she knew it—sleek and muscular, commanding and predatory as a cat and able to pull on her every erotic string.

She shuddered, the energy passing through her, more intimate and controlling than if he had seized her and thrown her down on that bed—the ambassador's bed of submission with all his ropes, bonds for tying, intimate adornments of love. What would they look like...on her?

Tonight, it could happen tonight.

Like a moon, drawn to its sun.

Assuming they managed to survive another visit to the Embassy. And given what she knew she must do there, that was by no means a foregone conclusion.

The question she had asked, which he could not answer, of what effect those pheromones of his would have in the long run, still concerned her. What if she started feeling an attachment to him, a sense of slavery even? Because that was something she would have to fight to her last breath.

Smiling sweetly, she gave him the answer he deserved. "You can fantasize all you like, but I promise you, alien, touch me again, talk to me as anything other than a colleague and I will do more than slap you. I will cut off your Vhrazhian balls and ship them to the exobiologists for study. Do I make myself clear?"

"You certainly leave no room for ambiguity," he replied, smiling slantedly, disturbingly human. He was learning fast, a little too fast.

* * * * *

Tryla tried to explain it all in the air car. Her sudden inspiration, the aha moment that had led her to make sense of things—beginning with her mysterious encounter with the sahvria.

Her task was made more difficult by their close proximity, not to mention the way his powerful body filled the passenger seat, emphasizing his flat stomach, strong thighs and crotch.

She was pretty sure he was still erect, judging by the swell in his uniform. And every now and again he would shift in the seat.

"He was her eyes," she explained, trying to keep her focus on the traffic in front of them and not on this overwhelming masculine presence that threatened to swallow her whole. "He described scenes to her and she painted them. Her reproductions are as exacting as engramatic images. I swear to you, they almost look better than the originals."

"Yes," said Vharhin. "I told you, our females have extraordinary talent."

They must, she thought, to be able to please males like this. She cringed, thinking what he might require in bed, the paces he would put a woman through. There would be no holding back, no hiding of her inner desires.

"It's more than talent. They must have been linking mentally, facing, like we did in the chief's office. You reminded me of that when you mentioned lovers having a connection. And then it hit me—why did the sahvria say she had been waiting for me? She recanted slightly and said 'one like me' but I think she meant me in particular."

"How is that possible? She couldn't have known what would happen to the ambassador, much less who would be put on the case."

His deep, raspy voice was affecting her concentration. He had as much as told her he could enslave her at will. Talk about unmitigated gall.

Talk about a phenomenal turn-on.

Vharhin took the idea of the quintessential bad boy in a whole new direction. At one point in her research she had read the text of ancient books—romances, they were called. The topic was sex, leading to lifelong pairings.

"Your thinking is too narrow, Vharhin, too linear. Just because no female in your history has defied conventional ideas and concepts doesn't mean it's not possible. Anyone who knows ErthSec could reasonably have guessed I would get this job. What if she's talking to someone? For that matter, what if someone else is facing with her to give her those designs of hers? I am not sure your ambassador is that widely traveled to have seen all the things she has painted."

"So you are leaning toward my theory?" asked Vharhin, attempting to return things to his own more pragmatic thought track. "That this is political and someone has been using the sahvria for greater ends?"

"I don't think so, Vharhin. There may be politics in this but the sahvria is running her own game and I don't think it has anything to do with the war."

"What then?"

"What indeed. Ask yourself, which game is older than war and peace? You Vhrazhians claim to be such an ancient society, you tell me."

"In Erth terms? You are referring to prostitution."

"Yes. Commercial sexual exchange or Comfort Zone as it is called today. Which is where we are heading at the moment."

"Though I still have no clue why," he complained.

"Everything in time. For now, consider this. What if the sahvria was collecting more than landscapes from her mate? What if she took his experiences as well, to be precise, his sexual ones?"

"I don't see how you can know any of those things," he said stubbornly.

"Just trust me," she said.

It was there, she knew it. The way the sahvria had told her she had nothing but time, she was telling her the opposite. She did have something else. And she wasn't restricted to that room, either, not limited to one woman's life. She was many women.

A thousand million kinds of loneliness...

Tryla shook her head. Something had happened back in that room. The bond she shared with the sahvria was not merely intuitive. It was almost like they had...faced.

"I have to trust you," he replied. "I have no choice."

"Good boy," she quipped. "Keep it up and I will let you buy me another etherbeer."

"It's not beer you want."

"What do you mean?"

"The way you keep looking at my crotch, Erthwoman, it does not take a psychologist to understand."

Fuck, is it that obvious? "I'm just making sure that erection of yours doesn't get the better of you."

"I am under control," he replied curtly.

"You don't look it. Maybe we should pull over so you can take care of business somewhere private."

His features hardened. "Land the air car," he said.

She laughed. "I was only joking, no offense."

"I have no intention of masturbating, if that is what you are implying," he said. "And you will land this vehicle now."

The firm, resolute tone of his voice made her obey. A kind of warm weakness washed over her, tingling and decidedly erotic.

Veering off from the main lanes of evening traffic she descended onto the roof of a hovering public garage, a disk some fifty or sixty meters across.

They were quite alone.

"You're wasting our time," she said in immediate objection as the craft touched down on the landing pad.

"On the contrary, I am making it possible for us to continue. Give me your hand," he ordered.

She hesitated and he took her wrist and placed her hand over his throbbing erection. Her toes curled inside her boots.

"You see what your taunting has led to?" he accused. "I am no longer able to focus."

"So jerk off," she croaked. "What do I care?"

"Vhrazhian men do not touch themselves in such a manner," he said. "That is what females are for."

She stiffened. "You can't mean..."

"You will pleasure me," he said. "And I will pleasure you. We will not have intercourse, thereby minimizing the effects of the pheromone."

"Vharhin, have you lost your mind?"

He opened his uniform to his waist, baring his hard, sculpted chest, his skin baked under an alien sun, his muscles forged under harsh, alien gravity.

Tryla gasped at the sight.

"Take my cock," he ordered. "Take it in your hand."

"Vharhin, please..."

He pushed her fingers beneath the material.

His shaft responded at once to her feminine touch, leaping fully engorged from its protective covering.

"Oh, stars..."

"Do not be afraid...stroke it, run your fingers along the veins," he said. "I have studied the differences between the races. The human male has a single large vein on the underside of the shaft while Vhrazhian male have three of them, one on top and two on the bottom, interlaced."

Tryla trembled. It felt like the first time.

"Squeeze," he urged. "I won't break."

She compressed her fingers into a fist. The blood rushed up and down, hot and throbbing. His cock was considerably more alive than any human one she had ever encountered.

"Yes, that's it." He was encouraging her as though it were some kind of social outing. "Increase the friction...up and down...faster...faster."

He leaned back in the seat, closing his eyes. She marveled at his handsome features. It thrilled her to see him so pleased by what she was doing.

She took her other hand and cupped his testicles. They were thick and heavy. She noted they were much smoother than those of a human male.

He groaned deeply. "Yessss..."

His hands were clenched into fists.

"Are you going to come?" she asked.

"No. It will take more. You will have to use your mouth."

It was her turn to groan—a low, soft sound at the back of her throat. "Vharhin, I don't know..."

He looked at her, imploring, his eyes lit with unquenched lust. "I must feel your lips on me, Tryla. It has been driving me mad watching your beautiful mouth, listening to your clever thoughts and plans all the while wanting to have possession of it, use it for my pleasure."

"Oh, Vharhin." She sucked her lip between her teeth. "You really do have some lame lines but damn it, they're working."

She bent her head, just to taste the tip, and grazed her lips with the tip of his alien shaft.

"Mmm..." He sighed and placed his hand on the back of her head. "That's it, Tryla...please me, my sweet woman."

His words caused a dam to burst. He was giving her permission to be wanton, submissive even.

She formed her lips into an "O" and slowly took him inside her mouth, centimeter by centimeter.

"Put your hands behind your back," he said.

Tryla assumed the position—bondage without rope or chains. Her body responded with a helpless vulnerability. His pleasure was her pleasure. She wanted to serve, she wanted to please.

"Good," he praised as if sensing her feminine need. "Good girl."

To be called girl was scandalous, though under the circumstances it was wickedly exciting.

She *was* a girl, an obedient female bringing her male to completion.

She tensed, wondering if he would indeed come in her mouth. What would he taste like? Would he expect her to swallow?

"You will sing for me," he promised with a slight groan. "Soon enough."

Tryla trembled inwardly, thinking what he intended.

How would she respond to his hand on her, controlling her pleasure, bringing her to orgasm?

Her cheeks turned bright red. She would not allow it.

"This is how a Vhrazhian woman gives pleasure," he said. "With her wrists crossed in surrender. She shows that she is his."

Tryla made a sound, partly protest, partly mindless lust. She was taking him straight to the back of her throat, like a vacuum, craving, taking him whole. She did not belong to him, though, and he damn well better know that.

"She waits for such moments...she lives to serve. Her beauty and grace and stalwart dedication are the model of duty in our society. It is why we fight and sacrifice."

So you can have sex slaves? Yeah, that's real noble.

His fingers twisted in her hair. He lifted her, pulling his cock free of her mouth. "You must not swallow my emission," he said. "Too many pheromones. They would be absorbed as easily through your stomach as your vaginal canal."

Tryla felt a wave of rebellion. "I'm not a fucking sex machine you can use. Now I suck, now I stop. I am a living, breathing woman."

He looked at her, genuinely perplexed. "You would defy me...now?"

"Why the hell not? I do it all the time."

Vharhin exhaled. "This is all so peculiar to me. I have never been with a woman of your world. You are so defiant."

"Damn straight I am." Tryla struggled, breaking free of his grasp. "This little exercise of yours, whatever it is, is over. It's back to work, buddy boy."

She fought back the waves of desire. More than anything she wanted that cock back in her mouth so she could make him come, make him release his alien cum. What would he taste like, sweet or pungent? Either way she had a strong feeling his issue would be copious.

"First we must attend to you," he said.

She shook her head. "Nope, not happening."

"You will climax," he said. "It is for your own good."

She laughed without a trace of humor. "Like you have any idea what's good for me."

"You're in heat and it's affecting our work."

Tryla moved to turn on the air car, ignoring him. Vharhin seized her hand, taking the ignition disk.

"Give that back!"

Vharhin placed the disk under his thigh, quite unreachable, unless she wanted to start something sexual with him again.

"Remove your clothing," he ordered as he closed his uniform, concealing his delectable body.

"Go to hell. Better still, go back to your own world, it's worse."

His hand moved to her thigh, sliding strategically between her legs.

"Don't touch me." She tried to dislodge him but his grip was strong, demanding.

His fingers found her hot spot. He punished her with caresses. "When I put my hand somewhere, Erthwoman, then that is where it stays."

His tone was good-natured but there was no mistaking the strength, the intent.

"Not without an invitation...Vhrazhian."

Why, oh why, wasn't she fighting? All she had to do was make her wishes known and he would respect them.

What did she want, though, really?

Vharhin moved to the zipper on her left shoulder. With that annoying, laser speed of his he pulled it down diagonally across her bosom. He immediately moved his hand, slipping it around one of her naked breasts.

"You are female." He massaged her breast. "You kissed me more than once and that was all the invitation I needed."

She squirmed in a vain effort to free herself. If anything she was making her body more appealing, more available.

"The more you resist," he warned, "the worse it will be. Give me leeway now and it will go easily."

Tryla whimpered, totally helpless. "You are not a gentleman."

Vharhin explored her breast at will, surveying its contours, feeling its weight, pressing the soft skin in such an expert way that she could hardly believe he had never touched a human female.

Perhaps Vhrazhian women were not very different?

"I'm not a man at all," he reminded.

"Oh...hell," she shuddered, putting her head back, trying to keep her mind clear. "Has anyone ever told you that your timing stinks?"

"You would rather I saved this for later?"

"No, I would rather it never happened at all," she decided.

"I have to touch you," he declared. "When a Vhrazhian male begins to feel these things...he must move his female to consummation."

"But...I'm not a Vhrazhian female," she panted. The way he was stroking her breast was different, demanding, exciting, alien. It made her want to lie with him on foreign landscapes, on the dry desert of his homeland, hot sand whipping about their bodies.

"I know," he hissed. "I shouldn't want you. This is exceedingly unpredictable and dangerous. I have to get you out of my system."

"What am I?" She gritted her teeth, determined to keep him from progressing any further. "A disease?"

"You talk too much, Erthwoman."

She cried out as he slid his hand under the material of her uniform, down over the flesh of her taut abdomen to her waist. He paused a moment, dramatically lingering. She didn't dare breathe as she waited for him to find her pussy. She was so wet and hot.

He reached his goal, barely grazing her swollen labia. She could feel the liquid dripping. Her scent was ripe in the air. How did it affect his Vhrazhian senses? Would it turn him on as it would an Erthman?

She hated that he had been able to resist an orgasm. It was as if he could shut himself on and off. He claimed he was this raging, hormonal beast but he was more like a manipulating, cold-hearted machine.

"Vharhin...you...bastard."

What was he doing? One second she felt the pressure of his fingers and then it was gone, over and over, teasing and building as if he'd had a lifetime's experience exploiting Erthwomen.

"Surrender to it, Tryla. Give me the orgasm I need from you, the orgasm you need for yourself."

Tryla moaned. There was no resisting his hand. She moved her pelvis against him. Her sensitive clitoris found the bone of his thumb—or rather, his thumb found her. She continued to curse him, her fists clenching and unclenching, her entire body vibrating. At all costs she must not give him the satisfaction of a climax.

"No," she shook her head. "You can't...make me."

He leaned in, delicately seizing her ear between his teeth. "*Rzshia*," he called her in his native tongue. "Stubborn little woman. This battle, you will not win. I have studied your biology. I know how it works all too well."

"You planned this," she accused.

"I had no intention of having sex with an Erthwoman," he said. "I simply thought it prudent to be prepared."

"A regular fucking Boy Scout you are...and don't ask what that is, it's very old."

"Like Sherlock?"

"Yeah..."

He continued playing with her body, alternating his manipulations of her clitoris with penetrations of his fingers, simulating intercourse. To add to the heat, he kissed her here and there, light butterfly kisses that only made her whimper in frustration.

He was a cruel, cruel man. She tried not to feel the things he was doing. He was better than any Erth lover, so masterful and commanding and sensitive.

The son of a bitch.

"It will be interesting for me to observe your orgasm," he said, as though conducting a scientific experiment. "Vhrazhian women are constructed slightly differently. They have more nerve endings along the sexual canal and are much less sensitive with regard to the clitoris. Medical experts and philosophers agreed unanimously that this is nature's way of tying the female's pleasure as directly as

possible to the act of ejaculation, as well as to the male's natural motions during intercourse."

"Self-serving macho propaganda," she hissed. "Men make excuses to keep things the way they want them."

Vharhin smiled. "I should have expected an argument."

He pinched the hot flesh of her nipple, as if in retaliation...or was it punctuation?

Tryla writhed. He had her now.

"Please," she said, hating herself for having been reduced to begging. "Don't."

"I will do as I wish," he said, showing no mercy. Tryla's body tensed and then released. She was giving it up to him and he was indeed leaving her no choice.

"If you think you have even come close to wearing me down," he said. "You are sorely mistaken. My kind is primed to dominate. The more you fight me the more relentless I become. From what you've observed already, do you think I will honestly be denied anything?"

"No." She tried to keep the awe from her voice. Who was this Vharhin, anyway? If all the other Vhrazhians had been half this good the war would have been over in an hour, with a very poor result on the Erth side.

"I have come here to obtain justice," he said. "To right that which is wrong and I will do that if it means I must take on the whole of the Erth government. Conquering the body of a single female seems rather small in comparison, don't you think?"

"Yes," she whispered, despising herself for wanting to be such a female at the mercy of such a man.

No wonder the Vhrazhian women knelt.

"Vharhin," she rasped, barely able to speak. "I'm ready...I will come for you."

"No," he said, suddenly denying her.

Tryla's world hung in the balance. She could barely focus, the images swirled—Vharhin's handsome, resolute face, his intent, alien eyes, his very down to Erth touch which she had just been deprived of.

"Vharhin...why?" she managed to say.

"You will beg for it," he said proudly. "You will appease me for your defiance."

She wanted so badly to tell him to take his orgasm and shove it. But she needed it too much and he knew that.

Was it the pheromones or just old-fashioned lust?

"Vharhin," she tried a softer, conciliatory tone, "let's be reasonable."

He seized her by the hair, bending back her neck. "I am not reasonable...I am Vhrazhian, from a line whose blood is more ancient than your whole species."

"You don't frighten me," she said, her breath coming in stabs.

"It's not fear I want, Erthwoman. It is obedience." His hand settled once more over her pussy, this time as if he owned it. "Spread," he ordered. "Wide."

She splayed her legs, heart slamming in her chest in anticipation of the torture ahead.

He worked her slowly, bringing her to the brink, utilizing the vulnerability of her engorged clit. Hooking his fingertips just inside the opening of her sex lips he made her wait.

And wait.

She tried moving against his hand.

"No," he said, his voice taking on a powerful, domineering edge.

Tryla relaxed her muscles.

He began to tease her again as soon as she calmed. She whimpered and squirmed and he ordered her to be still once more.

This time he put his fingertips to her lips.

"Open."

She was forced to taste herself, the bittersweet honey of her own sex.

"That, my dear partner, is the flavor of submission," he said. "And it doesn't take a Sherlock to figure it out."

She licked his fingers clean. Unbidden she began to suck them wantonly, taking the digits between her lips just as she had his cock.

Was it possible to bribe him with her body, to win favors from him?

"I do this for your own good," he told her. "You need to know what we are dealing with, the forces of sexuality that will consume us both."

She wondered who he was trying to convince—her...or himself.

Some of the things he was saying didn't add up. On the one hand he told her they had to resist and on the other he was pushing them forward into the very danger he was warning about.

Was he being objective or did he have emotions he was battling?

"I want to hear you," he said. "I want you to beg me for your orgasm with the respect and submission of a sahvria. Speak to me as your lord."

"I-I don't know how."

"I will teach you. Say these words. 'My lord, I humbly ask your permission for release. Please take the offering of my passion, the offering of myself, for your protection and control and domination.'"

"Vharhin, I can't."

"Yes, you can." He was commanding but there was also something pleading in his voice. Such a bundle of contradictions. If she didn't know better she would think he was lonely.

Taking a deep breath, picturing herself as best she could in the part of surrendered alien beauty ensconced in the love chambers of her mate, at his mercy, aroused and desperate for his touch, she began to recite.

"My lord, I humbly ask your permission for release. Please take the offering of my passion, the offering of myself, for your protection and control and domination."

She had to remind herself they were only words without meaning or application.

This was a game and nothing more.

He stroked her hair, his eyes complicated and very, very entrancing. More than anything in the world she needed to know what went on behind them, to register the pain that must be lodged there.

He had secrets. He was in a state of conflict, even in this time of relative peace.

"Yes, my sahvria," he said, his voice taking on a timbre that seemed to echo through alien chambers, hewn from alien stone. "You may give to me your gift."

Her cries filled the cabin of the air car as the forces overcame her. She spasmed against his hand, her pussy releasing its liquids, filling the air with the scent of her satisfaction.

It was more than his fingers she craved, though—she needed his cock. Ripping as this orgasm was, it was bound to leave her more wound up.

As the final waves passed over her, she looked across the seat. Vharhin had already retreated, abandoning her pleasure. He was sitting there, his body hard...his cock hard.

She tried to touch him. He grabbed her wrist. "No, Erthwoman."

"But..."

"Get dressed and fly the vehicle," he said, interrupting her to hand over the ignition disk.

She snatched it indignantly. Tryla's erotic peace had been transformed instantly to shame and fury. She reached across to zip her suit, her body numb and empty. In short order her breasts and pussy were hidden away again. Hidden, as were his body and his mind and everything else about him.

What kind of sick game was he playing? She wasn't a toy to be trifled with.

She would tell him off but that was assuming he was even worthy of her attention.

"It is time you told me more about your plans for tonight," he said as if nothing had happened. "What sort of destination do you have in mind?"

Unbelievable.

Tryla turned on the engines and pulled the control levers back for takeoff. Pushing past her rage she found a new place—cool as ice, sharp as a laser blade. So he thought he'd won the battle, did he? Well, it was time she took the war.

She hadn't wanted to land Vharhin in psycho-rehab like her last partner but he had asked for this. Begged for it, actually.

"My destination? Try the dome wall. Full-speed impact. What do you think of that?"

"You intend to kill us both, then?" asked Vharhin, as though he were blipping some minor bit of information.

"That is generally what happens when one hits the city dome at twice the speed of sound."

"I see," he said, leaning back in his seat. "And the purpose of this crash would be?"

"To create a universe with one less Vhrazhian in it."

"There would also be no Tryla," he said. "That would be a great loss for the universe."

"Don't try to fool me with flattery. Trust me, I 'm ready to die. I had a good run. We all have to go sooner or later, right?"

"Yes," he acknowledged. "We do."

The dome loomed straight ahead, silver black for night, humming with the immense energy it took to protect a city of half a billion people. An ordinary air car would shut off automatically when it got too close. But this was not an ordinary air car, this was an ErthSec model.

"Thirty seconds to impact," she informed him. "Is there anything you would like to say?"

"Not especially."

"Intend to die with pride intact, then, do you?"

"I will not die today," he said.

"Oh? And why is that? You think I don't have the guts?"

"Oh, I'm sure you have the guts. You just wouldn't give me the satisfaction, that's all."

"Twenty seconds. Now might be a good time to use your mumbo-jumbo sex powers and make me your slave."

"My powers, as you call them, are not designed to turn a female into a robot but to render her sweetly compliant and feminine in bed. At any rate, that passion will be unleashed fully only with my mate, Tryla. And we both know that can never be you."

She ought to have been indifferent or even relieved to hear him say that. For some reason, though, it made her even angrier. She would show him sweetly compliant and feminine.

"So I'm just a woman to use? A convenience?"

"You tell me, Tryla—what do you want as a woman? While you have shown you have some abilities, you have yet to prove to me that females belong outside the home."

"Fifteen. Nice try, Vharhin, trying to goad me into keeping you alive so I can fight with you more."

"You will keep me alive," he declared. "Because you want to go to bed with me. Your desire to please me with your body will override everything."

"Ten seconds," she snarled. "You arrogant cocksucker."

"You won't die, Tryla, not until you've submitted to me. I have seen how your body responds to male commands. You are curious and desirous and all-too willing. Hate me all you like, you will surrender. And you'll obey."

"Five!" Her body pulsed, on the point of explosion. No man could say those things to her. They were lies—terrible, sizzling slanders that burned her like brands—marking her, naming her.

Yes, he had a new name for her, something he wished to call her, something he wanted her to be for him. What was it and what did it mean? It was on Vharhin's lips and he would release it in his own time...not before.

Tryla's hands froze as she thought about the ambassador.

Nothing but time...

She felt as if she were back in the room with the sahvria. Not one woman but many. She tried to piece the clues together.

A secret—the fate of two worlds. The ambassador, her servant. What had he been fetching for her on that last night?

The sahvria had hesitated for just a second when she'd said the man had left.

What other possibility was there?

At the last second Tryla diverted the air car, averting collision.

Her heart slammed in her chest. She caught her breath.

Vharhin was unfazed.

"I didn't do that for you," she told him. "It's for the case. I am living for the case."

"Duty," he agreed.

Tryla piloted the air car down into the Comfort District.

He was being reasonable, even gracious, not belaboring what had happened. She ought to appreciate him being so professional.

Instead she hated all the more him for it.

But what was the use of hating or caring for anyone? Existence was a thousand million kinds of loneliness, one for each creature in the universe.

So had said the sahvria.

"Give me a minute," she said when they landed.

She used the mobile cleaner to freshen her body, removing the evidence of Vharhin's effect on her. The tiny whisk ball did its job, cleansing with silent efficiency.

But it could not erase the effects on her insides. This man, this alien, had broken through to places no one had ever been.

To her dismay she discovered a tiny tear in the corner of her eye. She whisked it away. Just like that, the evidence of her pain had been erased.

If she wished, she could arrange for a memsweep sometime later and remove the memory of this entire encounter.

A miracle of modern technology.

Life had been rendered so very livable.

Pain swept away like so much dust.

For the average citizen, erasing a difficult past was a happy option. For agents like herself, it was a prerequisite.

Memsweep was a part of the debriefing after each case. In addition to that, her personal history had been removed. That allowed her to function with cool precision, no susceptibility to blackmail through kidnap of family members, no personal bias that might keep her from obeying orders.

One day, if she chose to leave ErthSec, she could have them back. They were on storage. That was the law. Nothing swept could be permanently erased for five hundred solar cycles. She could visit the Membank, select a private compartment and jack in.

She had been seven when she'd lost her father and her uncle. Her mother had died of natural causes just after her birth. Birth memories were tricky, they tended to fragment. You couldn't hold them together. She had known her father and uncle, however, up to her seventh birthday.

That's when the Vhrazhians had attacked the colony.

ErthSec's psycho-rehab officers, better known as brain drains, had recommended she not dwell on the issue but how could you leave a part of yourself aside? She needed the burning hate, even if it was only counterfeit, manufactured, borrowed from blips she'd downloaded – full of the heartfelt accounts of others still blessed and cursed with the details of a personal history.

The need to find justice, to apprehend criminals, those who preyed on the weak, was her job, her motivation – it was the air she breathed.

Many were her enemies, internal and external but the greatest of those...were tears.

If she wanted proof that Vharhin was bad for her, corrosive to her soul, that was it. He was eating at her from the inside. That meant he couldn't be fought in the ordinary way. He was a cancer. She would kill off his influence. Even if a part of her had to die in the process.

Chapter Five

Vharhin suppressed his raging desire as they walked down the street, doing his level best to stay at Tryla's side, not touching, not tasting. The chaos in his mind and body was growing. Nearly uncontrollable erections—ultimatums of sexual intent to an Erthwoman—and a steady pounding in his brain, which he feared had something to do with a need to release his full mating lust, the pheromonic captivation known as thrazha among his people.

His half-baked attempts to control and redirect with Tryla were like pouring rocket fuel on an inferno. He had nearly ejaculated in her sweet mouth. Who knew what a full dose of his cum would have done to eradicate her defenses, her very will.

And what made him think he could settle matters by compelling her to orgasm under his touch? It only made him want to command her all the more, invading, overwhelming her senses, penetrating her sex with his cock.

She wanted it, too. Her little stunt with the air car only showed how violently she was fighting off the desires. Would he do better to simply make love to her and hope for the best, knowing in the long run there were plenty of social pressures to keep them from uniting fully?

This so-called Comfort District was of no help. The streets were lined with flashing, oozing sex shops, sex in words and sex in symbols and living sex in the form of male and female prostitutes and even androids with exaggerated body parts and outlandish costumes.

Sex was legal on Erth, encouraged in all its forms. Though it was not categorized as a commercial transaction but rather as a service of ErthGov, the worldwide government. Actual physical intercourse as well as all the latest possibilities for blipsex and mindsex. A sated population was a happy population, such was the argument.

For Vhrazhians, sex was intricately entwined with duty. One made love to one's mate, pleasing her and reducing sexual tensions, balancing their lives and maintaining the social fabric. One reproduced, one pleased oneself properly to remain productive. Abstinence and excess were both frowned upon.

A man should never run from his needs but meet them in such a way as to restore the balance.

He had been trying to do that with Tryla, though as usual, she had misunderstood his motives. One would think a female would be appreciative to receive pleasure without expectations in return. For his part, he had hoped that in allowing her release, he would feel a sense of completion where she was concerned.

Misguided though he might have been, his intentions had been pure. She should have said thank you and moved on. Instead she had tried to touch him without permission. He'd had to stop her and that had made her angry. Why? A woman should do only what pleased a man and only a man knew his wants.

The fact that he was battling almost constant erections in her presence was not helping matters. Even an adolescent of his kind was expected to conduct himself better. What kind of man was ruled by his hormones? And he was no ordinary male and this was no ordinary situation.

The number of missions this important in the history of his people could probably be counted on the ridges of a ghrushi. And all he wanted was to lie down with the Erthwoman, to entwine limbs, to lose his hands in her hair, to breathe her scent, to get them both drunk off the fire of his blood.

Vharhin could only imagine what his father would say. The bulwark of his people. The Vhrazhian's Vhrazhian, the very epitome of tradition and duty.

His words, the disappointment etched in his face as he spoke.

"My son, must it come to this – a petty, childish rebellion? I gave you this chance to come to Erth, I depended on you and this is how you repay me?"

It wasn't like Vharhin wasn't trying to do his duty. Could he help if Tryla was so distracting? That he couldn't even trust himself to work side by side with her for a few hours without making love to her with his hands?

Did she feel rejected, teased? Who knew how Erthwomen thought. A Vhrazhian meant what he said and said what he meant. The same could not be said of Erthers.

Vhrazhia had not started the war. That was truth.

Tonight, Vharhin wanted to make love to Tryla. He had nearly told her that in the pub. Whether or not the etherbeer possessed him or the effect of thrazha did not matter. It was real and time was not in his favor.

Unbidden, his mind slid over the contours of her naked body as he remembered it. He had touched her skin, bonded with her heat. She had moved with passion like the most erotic of love dancers on Vhrazhia. Such a paradox. Strong and smart, fearless but more vulnerable, more open than any Vhrazhian woman could ever be.

Perhaps it was because she had no shell, no protection of tradition. To look in her eyes was to see all the way into her soul. A Vhrazhian and his mate could live a lifetime and never delve that deep. There were too many rules, too much protocol. Everything was scripted, just like the bows.

"Big spen spen." A female love android reached for Vharhin, speaking in some sort of Erth slang as he passed a rounded portal of glowing silver. "Happy hap now now?"

"No happy hap with him." Tryla intervened, a trifle possessively, it seemed to Vharhin.

He suppressed his amusement. What sort of emotions was she fighting off? She was infinitely fascinating. One lifetime wouldn't be enough, not by a long shot. And not because she was hiding but because she would always be growing, changing, evolving.

"Perhaps I should check her out," Vharhin suggested, teasing. "To see if she has any clues for us."

She pulled him along. "Those aren't the kinds of clues we're looking for, Sherlock."

Yes, Tryla was definitely showing romantic attachment. Was she aware of it?

The android blew him a kiss. "Come backy back."

A Peace Patrol glided down the street, two officers—one male, one female. They were riding inside a golden, translucent sphere, their eyes serene but watchful under white helmets.

The people paid them no attention as they walked by, laughing and talking in their tight plasticene clothing, scanty and colorful.

Such a scene could not be more alien to him. Vhrazhians did not congregate for pleasure nor would they ever pass by each other on a street with such indifference. Meeting a stranger, even casually, required a complex set of rituals, a mutual exorcism of anxiety and paranoia.

He had to admit to a certain level of agitation at the moment. These humans were a messy, careless lot—so much potential for error. Interestingly, the presence of Tryla calmed him. Through her eyes, things seemed almost normal. It was amazing how comfortable he felt by her side. Had they been together only a day? For a split second he imagined himself without her again, here or elsewhere. It was not a pleasant thought—much imbalance, dark, unhappy.

He told himself it meant nothing.

"Tryla, would you please tell me what we are looking for?"

"You don't have to keep harping on me," she said, stopping in her tracks.

"I wasn't," said Vharhin.

A couple brushed past them. They had tight, striped suits and pink hair like the tufts of Yarraah birds. They held hands, jeweled fingers inseparable.

"Bullshit. You're not getting your way and you're pissed. You can't take me over, you can't figure me out and you are not running the show so you're pouting."

"Vhrazhians don't pout."

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I know. And they don't laugh or cry or make mistakes."

He had no idea what had gotten into her but he would put a stop to it. "Whatever you think I am, I am not a machine, Tryla. I do require a certain minimum amount of courtesy. Every time I turn around you are ignoring me, insulting me or trying to kill me."

Her eyes flashed—emerald lightning over a green glass sea. "Well, maybe you should take a hint and go home."

"Vhrazhians don't take hints either," he said proudly.

She shook her head. "You're impossible. Look, I haven't explained because I know you'll just try to argue with me. When I visited the sahvria, we had some kind of communication. Like facing. She was trying to tell me something and she couldn't speak it. The clue was in those pictures. One of them was a scene, somewhere near here. When I find it, I will know where to look."

She turned around and started walking again before he could make any inquiries.

He followed, smiling in spite of his annoyance, enjoying the view of her bottom. He imagined what it would be like to have her from behind, to take possession of her once and for all.

She would scream with need...she would beg again. She would sweat. She would be his.

Tryla's method of investigation was a mystery. She would walk a little and then stop in front of one door or another. At one point she stood in the middle of the street, walking in a complete circle, utterly oblivious of anyone watching her.

He envied her pluckiness and marveled at her free, unselfconscious nature. For him there were always the eyes of his fellow Vhrazhians—so many, all the way back to the beginning—judging, evaluating what was proper for his species. Here on Erth it was easier. He felt somewhat shielded, almost invisible.

Was that what had attracted the ambassador, if indeed he had come here?

It was hard to believe. If it proved true the scandal would be outrageous, almost as damaging to the stability of his society as if he had been killed or kidnapped by Erthers. Many would demand the immediate recall of the entire Erth delegation and an end to diplomatic relations. Others would demand satisfaction, blood for blood.

Vharhin pushed the implications back in his mind. He must keep focused on Tryla, on the immediate space around her body, the persons in her proximity. Should anyone come too close, he would attack without mercy, no matter what the danger to himself.

The realization startled him.

A Vhrazhian male was ingrained with the impulse to protect females in a general, dispassionate way. When one in particular came along for whom he was prepared to give his life, however, that was said to be a sign of his desire to mate with her.

Tryla left her position in the street and walked back up to him. "What's that look for?" she demanded.

He frowned. "You took an unnecessary risk standing in the street like that."

"What do you care? I would think you'd be glad for a chance to get rid of me. Besides, this street is closed to all but foot and Peace Patrol traffic."

"As you say," he replied.

"Over there." She pointed at a green door, set into a windowless silver wall several meters down the street. "That's what we're looking for. The ambassador went there at some point."

"How do you know?"

"I can feel it."

"That isn't a very scientific approach," he pointed out.

"Neither is standing out here all by yourself, which is where you'll be once I go in."

Vharhin considered the sex den. The people in there could be kidnappers, murderers, political conspirators of the highest order. "What if it's a trap, Tryla? You said yourself the sahvria was lying and you suspect her of having unsavory Erth contacts. Why would she help you?"

"I don't know. Vhrazhian psychology is your department. Guilt, maybe? A desire to play cat and mouse with me? Whatever it is, we won't find out standing out here with our thumbs up our asses."

"My thumbs are nowhere near my posterior," he pointed out.

"It's an expression, Sherlock." She pushed her hand into his back. "Come on, you're not getting any younger...or any less ugly."

Tryla pressed the contact button. A tiny view port slid open in the door.

"State your purpose," said a metallic voice, either a droid or a synthesizer.

"We collect art," said Tryla, likely employing some code. "Got anything new?"

The voice did not reply. A moment later the view port slid closed.

"Come..."

The door opened inward.

Vharhin was met with a wall of bubbles, thick and colorful. One by one they popped, wet and thirsty on his skin. They tasted of Erth sweets, much too sugary for his taste. The air smelled of honey...and also of arousal. The same scent as that emitted by Tryla.

Vharhin's cock stiffened.

The worst timing in the world, just as Tryla had said.

A squat droid with tentacles addressed them. "You are here to see Madame Duplessix?"

"Who else?" said Tryla, sounding as though the woman was her best friend.

Vharhin smiled. That was one of the many things he loved about her—call it moxie, cheekiness, bravado. Scratch that—he only liked things about Tryla, he did not love them. Love was too strong. Love was wrong and quite impossible.

"I will see if she is available." The droid hummed away on tiny wheels, gliding across the soft, fur-covered floor. The walls and ceiling were covered in fur, too.

Everything was pink, Vharhin noted, including the bubbles and the shimmering lights. The overall effect was that of being inside a woman's sex, Vharhin mused.

No doubt this was intentional.

"I find your Erth tastes strange," he said, trying to shake off his attraction to the room...to her.

"Your cock seems to be enjoying it well enough," she said.

Vharhin frowned, shifting. Talk about being caught between a rock and a hard place. "Vhrazhian physiology is complex. The male response is not always sexual in origin."

She snorted. "Just admit you are hot for me. It's so painfully obvious."

"I will admit nothing."

She came up close, blowing hot Erth air — pink and moist and scented. "I got so wet, didn't I, back in the air car? I came so hard on your hand. Too bad that's all you're ever going to get. I'm still aroused but not for Vhrazhian cock. I might even pick up a male android tonight, how about that?"

Vharhin cast a stern glance her way. What kind of nonsense was she about now?

Her taunting was surely designed to heat his blood. He wanted to confine her, teach her whose she was and what place she was meant to occupy. Driven by instincts as old as his race—drives that descended from beast creatures still lurking in primordial jungles—Vharhin seized her hair in his fist. He bent her head back, just as he had in the air car. She smiled in triumph.

"What are you going to do now, Vhrazhian? Rip off my clothes and fuck me on the floor of this sex den?"

Vharhin smiled back. His teeth nibbled her lips as he answered. "I will do much worse, Erthwoman. I will let you simmer."

He released her just as a tall, shapely woman, in a black dress that fell to her ankles, entered. Her hair was dark as a raven's wing and piled high on her head.

"Well," she smiled. "I see you two have gotten into the spirit of the place. Unfortunately if you only do each other, there's no profit for me."

"We are here on business," said Tryla.

"I can see that," she mused, glancing at Vharhin's erection. "If I may say so, sir, your business could be much better handled by me than this skinny little girl here."

Tryla approached the woman, eye to eye. "I'm going to overlook that remark because I happen to be in uniform. You did notice the uniform, didn't you?"

"ErthSec," she said with an air of false pleasantness.

"Correct. Which means we can do this the easy way or the hard way. The hard way involves me calling for backup and shutting you down for a full investigation, maybe a month or so of lost business."

"If you want to talk privately," she said. "You must follow me."

Vharhin and Tryla were led down a long corridor. Vharhin took great interest in each room as they passed it. He was looking for just the right one.

At last, he found it. Bright red, decorated with the Erth material called velvet. Speaking directly into Tryla's ear he gave his final warning.

"Continue to play with my desires, woman, and you will find yourself in there with me when our business is concluded."

"Doing what?" she asked, maddeningly coy.

His hand cupped her ass and the heat of it burned his skin like the Vhrazhian sun. "Whatever I wish, little one."

Tryla's knees nearly gave way. Her heart continued to pound, though the sound was hollow. His hand moved from her ass up to the small of her back, urging her forward. They had business to conduct but she could concentrate on nothing but the threat, the tantalizing intent of his words.

He had called her "little one". He had also threatened to raise things to a whole new level. Indeed, he was prepared to end the battle between them, the constant positioning, the hot and cold, the parries and thrusts, the near misses.

Vharhin was ready to take her. She did not doubt his words. Her body knew already his power and his integrity. Whatever he wanted, she would not be able to hold back.

No, he would do as he'd said. But was he sane? What of the risks he had spoken of? Sex with him would not be like any other she had ever had. She would give to him and he would take in a way no Erthman could.

How much would he want? She was an Erthwoman, not one of his own species. He could not expect to take so much as to leave her a mere shell of a woman, pining for him in a tiny room, a slave to her own heart.

Would she have to beg mercy of this Vhrazhian, once again, this son of her enemies? Such a lonely struggle, to keep the hate alive when the rest of the world had forgotten, moved on to new wars, new alliances.

Sleeping with the enemy – she could almost laugh at the irony.

She could run away now. Or pull her gun again.

Though she feared it was beyond that. His power was in his eyes now and his hands. Not muscle, not the brawn of his alien landscape, but the proven power to excite her body, to compel her to orgasm in his time, under his command.

Those hands... If he but snapped his fingers...oh, stars, she was enraptured. Her worst fears come true. Drowning in her own desire. He had done it to her already in the air car, made her plead and whimper, made her surrender her soul for the pleasure of an orgasm.

And what an orgasm. It had shattered her, made her feel like she lived in a fundamentally different universe, one where Vharhin – his scent, his touch, his cock – loomed dangerously close to the center. Like a sun maybe, or was he a vortex sucking her down? She had to keep her head above water. She had to remain what she was –

Erthwoman, agent, perpetual smart aleck, thorn in the side of her superiors but always the one they turned to in a pinch.

"Step into my office," the woman said, waving them into one of the bedrooms.

A young couple was making love on the bed. The woman's skin was painted entirely in gold. She was artfully writhing on top of her partner, who was dark-skinned and entirely hairless.

His enormous phallus was fully engulfed in her pussy. As she lifted her ass the base of his shaft was revealed, glistening and pulsing. Her face was a mask of desire. She closed and opened her eyes, her lips moving as if in communion with an unknown god.

The man tensed and relaxed his muscles in reply, savoring her youth and energy.

"I am Madame Duplessix," she announced, completely unmoved by the scene in front of them. "Though I suspect you have figured this out for yourselves."

"Yes we have," said Tryla, trying to keep her eyes off the young couple. She hoped it wasn't giving Vharhin ideas. "Though there is much more we don't know."

"We deal in deception." Madame Duplessix smiled. "It is the great greaser of life's engines."

"I assume you speak of fantasy and anonymity," said Tryla. "I can only imagine how important discretion is at a place like this. I'm sure you would like us out of here quickly. Give us the name we need and you'll never see us again. Fail to cooperate and—"

"It is a matter of universal security," interrupted Vharhin.

Tryla cursed silently. When would this man learn to shut up and let her do the police work?

"A matter of universal security, eh?" She pursed her lips, savoring her newfound leverage. "In that case I would say we should work together, by all means. I give you what you want and you must give me something I want."

Tryla frowned. She was looking at Vharhin, giving him a hint of the firestorm she would unleash on him later. "Madame, if we could stick to the issue. You will cooperate and thereby avoid possible detention for interfering in an investigation."

"I am sticking to the issue. My one and only concern is sex. You are Vhrazhian," she said to Vharhin.

He inclined his head.

Sure, why not tell the woman everything under the sun?

"You are a lucky young woman," said Madame Duplessix to Tryla. "Or should I say a lucky agent?"

"My name is Agent Tryla and why do you say I am lucky?"

She smiled coyly. "How does the saying go? Once you have gone Vhrazhian you never go back?"

Are you telling me you have had sex with a Vhrazhian?" Tryla asked.

"A lady does not kiss and tell."

"Do you mean the ambassador?" Tryla pressed. "Is he the one you have been with or do you mean someone else?"

Vharhin grasped her arm. She shivered at the minor contact, imagining the night to come, the things he would do. "Let me do the talking," he said.

Tryla yielded in spite of her better judgment. The act heated her blood and made her moist between her thighs. It was submission, another foreshadowing.

"Madame." Vharhin approached the woman. She did not flinch.

Indeed, she kept her poise as he looked her squarely in the eye. Slowly a smile crept across her face. "Does that answer your question?"

"What question?" Tryla wanted to know. "Who asked a question?"

"She has been with the ambassador," he told Tryla simply.

Tryla did not understand how he could know that. "If that's true wouldn't you be the man's slave?" she asked Madame Duplessix.

She offered a husky reply. "Who says that I am not?"

"Were you the only one to be with the ambassador?" Vharhin asked.

"I wish," she sighed. "I would have done anything for him. But he wasn't satisfied, not with me or any of my females."

"You sent him elsewhere?"

"To the Pulsar," she said.

Tryla tensed. "I know the place. It has a reputation."

"How long ago did you send him there?" asked Vharhin.

"A week ago, maybe two."

"Did you know anything about his mate?" Tryla interjected.

Madame Duplessix smiled mysteriously, leaving Tryla with the strange feeling that no more information would be had today, not with any amount of threats or bribery.

"Thank you," said Vharhin to Madame Duplessix. "For your help."

"Not at all." Her eyes smoldered. "I could do more, if you wish..."

"Allow us the use of a room," he said.

The floor dropped out from beneath Tryla.

"But of course. No charge for law enforcement." She trailed her finger along his arm. "Would you like a second to join you, someone with a little more meat on her bones?"

"No," said Vharhin with a fierceness that both thrilled and terrified Tryla. "This one is all I want."

Tryla wondered, *Does he mean just for now or for some longer period of time?*

"Come on," he said, taking her hand.

Her flesh melted into his. There was an intensity about him, something she hadn't seen before.

They were going to need to talk about this. More precisely she was going to need to talk him out of doing what he was intending to do.

She moved down the hall in a blur, scarcely aware of the motion of her footsteps. The next thing she knew they were inside the room he had shown her earlier.

Vharhin closed the old-fashioned hinge door behind them. Her heart skipped a beat at the sound of the knob turning and the reality it signified. They were alone, finally, in a state of intimacy, in a room designed purely for lightning-quick sexual encounters between those who might never see each other again.

Tryla retreated at once to the far wall, placing her back to the red velvet surface. "I'm not sure what you are thinking, Vharhin, but you have no justification. I have done nothing to you since we talked."

"I don't have to justify myself to you."

"Vharhin, you aren't thinking clearly."

"I'm thinking about taking you, Tryla, and that is precisely what I am going to do."

She swallowed hard. "But what about the pheromones?"

"It can't be worse than what I feel now. I'm going out of my mind."

"It's just this place, Vharhin, they spray chemicals in the air."

He offered no reply. He was coming toward her.

"Can we just talk for a minute? About the case?"

As he drew closer and closer he said in a deep rasp, "The case will keep."

"But the ambassador —"

"Tryla if I don't make love to you now, I won't be able to think. I won't be able to function. This has to happen."

"No it doesn't. Just...just be stronger...take a tranquilizer."

"It's too late for drugs." He reached for the zipper of his unisuit. She held her breath as he lowered it.

His chest was magnificent, every bit as strong and solid as she'd remembered from the air car. What she'd missed before were all the details—the way his belly button receded into his rock-hard stomach, the way his abdomen flattened with his breath, such a keen and delicious contrast to the expanse of his pectorals. She had never seen such muscles, such defined biceps, like he spent every minute of his day in some bio-training facility.

No, not a facility but some natural environment, a stone quarry, breaking rocks day after day or wrestling giant ghrushis. Where was it he had said his heart was? Slightly higher than on a human and more to the center.

He had a scar across his left pectoral. She wondered as to its origin. She wanted to lick the faint line and guess his history. More fascinating still was the mark on his left hip, very small and intricate, in red and black. A symbol of some kind.

Vharhin slid the suit down farther, exposing his cock and testicles.

She held her breath at the sight of his cock springing proudly free. Oh, yes...she remembered the taste of it, the velvet feel against her fingers.

Soon it would be inside her. Vharhin had made the decision.

Her pussy liquefied in anticipation. She would undress too, if she weren't paralyzed. This shaft of his shot Vhrazhian seed, it made Vhrazhian babies. He had told her that his seed could affect her, perhaps irrevocably.

Vharhin took off his boots and disposed of the suit. "What you see," he said, arms at his sides, his body at once relaxed and intensely taut and ready to pounce. "No woman should see but my mate."

Her breathing was ragged. His words, as usual, confused and complicated matters. Her brain cried out in warning. There were *so* many issues here, baggage enough to sink an old-fashioned fleet of water ships. If the door weren't locked, if he weren't naked, blocking the way, if she weren't too weak to move, much less run, she would probably start another fight, worm her way out of this.

"You are lucky you're built like Adonis," she said. "Because your pick-up lines sure suck."

"From the moment I saw you, I screamed in my soul to have you."

"Better," she said.

"I would kill to have you. I would let nothing stand between us..."

"Yeah," she gasped as he took her mouth. "Now you're on the right track..."

Vharhin robbed her of all breath. His lips were hard and dominating and merciless. She closed her eyes to Erth and awoke in an alien world.

She went limp in his arms.

"The first time," he said, carrying her to the soft, silky bed. "Will be furious—thunder and lightning."

She landed on her back and he descended on top of her, continuing the kiss, his mouth plundering hers as he commenced the inevitable attack. One hand on her zipper, stripping her, the other at her hip, confident, possessive, displaying instant ownership.

"Vharhin, are you sure we should..."

He lifted her long enough to pull the uniform down over her shoulders to her waist. She was dimly aware of helping him the rest of the way, stripping the material away until she was naked.

"Don't make me think, woman," he growled.

She exhaled, giving herself permission to explore his body, the hard male contours, the muscles under his skin, the line of his spine leading to his taut buttocks.

She was so wet—had been since forever. His scent filled her nostrils now. There was no fighting it back. He exuded masculinity and she breathed it. She could be nothing but a naked writhing woman in his presence, nothing but his...

Dimly she wondered what other couples had mated in this room, young and old, human and alien. Had any of them ever been in love? Would she know such a thing if she felt it?

"We will delay this no longer," he said. "I must be inside you, I must know you. I must breathe you from the inside."

She groaned softly in agreement. She had need of him, too, his unyielding shaft plumbing her depths, awakening her, sending her nerve endings into overdrive.

Opening her legs, she prepared to take his Vhrazhian cock. He positioned himself so that the head of his shaft just barely piercing the ridge between her labia.

His cock was hot, almost searing. It was hotter than a human's. She writhed in anticipation, arching her back, trying to draw him inside.

"Tryla," he said, delaying the consummation yet again. "You should know something..."

Fuck, now what?

"Vhrazhian males are capable of multiple orgasms."

"You're just full of surprises, aren't you?" she quipped.

"I will attempt to keep my release of cum to a minimum."

"Thing number fifty-six a woman never expects to hear during sex."

"Are you determined to make a joke out of everything, woman?"

"As long as you are determined to keep blowing my mind, yes."

"This will not work if you are not submissive."

"It will also not work if you don't actually penetrate me," she pointed out.

He made a low growling noise. "You have much to learn."

"You're supposed to be teaching me."

"Lesson one..." he replied, his eyes on fire.

Tryla bit into his shoulder as he slammed home, his cock penetrating her to the hilt. She answered with a deep groan. "You might have tried some foreplay," she teased.

"Foreplay..." he said, as if quoting some holodictionary. "Is an activity practiced by Earth couples prior to intercourse in order to prepare the sexual organs for proper deployment."

"You make it sound so romantic."

"On Vhrazhia a woman needs only the tone of her mate's voice, telling her to be ready."

"I know plenty of guys who would love to move to Vhrazhia, then."

"You were more than ready to be entered," he said. "You lie beneath me, penetrated, conquered."

"You're stating the obvious. I hate when people do that."

"You do like to talk, though, don't you? You like the sexual banter."

"I think there are better things to do with the mouth, actually."

"Like this?" He flicked his tongue over the tip of her nipple causing the flesh to superheat. He did it with a whiplike quickness, almost stinging.

She moaned.

He repeated the action on the other nipple, much slower and more lingering.

"I, too, enjoy discussions," he said devilishly. "Especially when the female is in her proper place."

Tryla squirmed and found she was a lot weaker than she had been. "I'll show you...my proper place."

"You are already in it," he said. "This is what we have been moving toward, and fighting against so violently."

She was breathing quickly and shallowly. "Just...just fuck me and get it over with."

"You say the sweetest things," he parroted her earlier taunting.

"I'm not going to beg like before."

"No," he agreed. "You will be even more submissive this time. You'll have to if you expect me to orgasm."

"You make it sound like some holy gift of the gods."

"If you would rather we stop?"

"Fine, pretty please...fill me with magic Vhrazhian cum."

Vharhin bent his head to her nipple again, this time capturing it with his teeth. He held on to it, lightly grinding, sending maddening sensations up and down her spine. The heat pooled in her pussy.

He was right there, his cock was in her and he wasn't doing a fucking thing—not moving, not thrusting, not anything.

"Okay, okay, I give."

"You know," he said calmly, looming above her. "I have tried to figure out the attraction. You're such a pale thing compared to our own women and your manners, quite frankly, should have been a huge turn-off and yet you have managed to entrance me, Tryla Numidia. How can that be?"

"How the fuck should I know? See a Vhrazhian psychologist."

He retracted his cock to the halfway point. She clutched at his arms as he set off hot fires—miniature points of pleasure and pain—all along the walls of her sex.

"You are beautiful," he said. "No, you are much more than that. You are like the living embodiment of your planet, an amalgam of exquisite contradictions, storms for

eyes, soft, smooth skin, gentle curves, but underneath such passion and fire. You are undisciplined, you will not conform and you will never yield. Yet you crave to find the man who will match you."

She arched her back. She felt like she had been skewered by his words. He pulled his cock out farther and she wanted to cry, or was it scream? She couldn't tell anymore. The boundary between her and him and the world was dissolving.

She needed this, she needed him.

"And what do you think of me?" he wanted to know.

"You're...you're a stubborn vooz," she said.

He chuckled, the sound curling in her belly, warm and tingling. "The women of your world are supposed to be emotionally expressive, feelings-oriented."

"And the men of yours are supposed to keep their cocks to themselves," she countered.

"It's too late for that." He pulled his cock back so that only the head of it was between her pussy lips.

She ground her teeth.

"Don't move," he ordered. "You'll only make this more difficult."

"I can see why you are in the VISS," she lamented. "You sure know how to torture."

"Perhaps I don't want it to end," he said.

The remark hung in the air. She dared not reply directly.

"So what do I have to do?" she said.

"For what?"

"To move this along, what else?"

"Tell me something you like about me."

"You're that insecure?"

"Vhrazhian sexual performance is tied to the female's adoration."

"Good luck, then, because I don't adore anyone."

"I have seen how you look at me."

"It's called being pissed off."

He withdrew his cock entirely.

"No, wait. You're attractive...in an alien way."

"When we came here you did not want the robot female to have me or Madame Duplessix, either."

She swallowed. She did not like where this was going.

"You were jealous."

"Never."

Vharhin changed tactics. Seizing her wrists, pinning her hands over her head he sank his cock back inside her and began a steady motion—fluid, powerful thrusts—quintessentially male.

She could not help but respond, her body seeking to draw him in so she could wrap herself around his throbbing cock. She craved contact with his skin and with it, the fullness of penetration. The thin veneer of control she had maintained was quickly shattered. Her body was a waterfall, running headlong over the rocks, plunging into oblivion.

"I'm g-going to come," she sputtered.

"No." He stopped abruptly, cutting off her pleasure. "You will not."

She spun out a string of curse words.

He waited until she was exhausted. "Done yet?"

She nodded, her body wrung out and overcharged at the same time, her senses confused, her emotions on serious overload. In short, she was primed for the man's domination.

"I will say it again. You were jealous," he repeated.

She whimpered. This was so unfair. "Vharhin..."

He narrowed his gaze, letting her know he was not about to back down.

"I don't know what I was feeling," she said honestly, her pussy clenching around his shaft, her pelvis fused to his, her breasts torturously close but not quite touching his chest. "I was trying to think about the case."

"You must learn to be more in touch with your feelings," he said. "Or else they will one day betray you to the wrong person."

"They can't get more wrong than you," she said, unable to resist.

"I am only playing with your surrender, Tryla. I am not an enemy looking to gain your secrets."

"Why can't you just fuck me like a normal man?"

"This is how Vhrazhians make love." He lowered his mouth to hers, branding her with a kiss. She responded with full passion, her eyes closed, her lips hot against his.

Tryla felt the growing hunger, the same one she had felt in the air car which had made her want to merge with him and push everything else aside until they were one, pulsing together, consummating.

"More," she rasped. "More."

Vharhin continued at his own pace, unrelenting, unyielding. She relished the sensations, her pussy trying to memorize the particular geography. She could definitely feel the extra ridges. His whole organ was pulsing, responding, communicating in a way a human cock did not.

Tryla was beginning to see why Vhrazhian women lived for their men. Why think of anything else? Why trouble oneself with the mundane world, career and civic responsibilities?

He moved her wrists together, and held them overhead in one hand.

She felt deliciously imprisoned.

His eyes burned holes into her soul. She could not move, she could not free herself and why, for stars' sake, would she want to?

His thrusts were perfect, as precise as a metronome. She melted before this continued erotic onslaught, her pussy gushing for him, her own fragrant and frail scent mingling with his so much more potent one.

"You will come soon," said Vharhin. "It will be at my command and it will feel like nothing you have ever known."

Who was she to doubt him at this point? She braced herself as instructed, for all the good it would do.

"Vharhin..." she gasped his name.

"Not until I say," he reminded.

He sealed his mouth to her breast, whether to comfort or enflame her, she didn't know.

It did both. It did neither.

Oh, hell, she didn't know what was happening. Except that everything was blasting apart. "Puh-please..." she cried, wanting him to put her out of her misery. "Let me...come for you."

Vharhin nibbled and suckled. He teased. He rose and fell, lifting his body, emptying her and refilling her, maximizing the sensations along the walls of her sex, exploding her from within—silent screams of ecstasy. She climaxed again but somehow he worked it so that she wasn't satisfied, only craving more.

"Wh-what are you doing to me?" she asked, her hair damp across her cheeks.

"Teaching you...not to play with fire."

Vharhin held very still. She whimpered as he ejaculated, an act of pure dominance. She should have been enraged, put off, instead she wanted more.

She lifted her body.

He kept out of range, above her. His cock barely touched her labia.

"I-I've learned my lesson," she said.

"Have you?"

"Yessss..."

"What have you learned?"

"N-not to tease."

"You told me I could not have you," he reminded her of her ill-chosen words when they had first arrived. "But that is clearly not true."

"You can have me," she moaned. "You can do what you like."

"You are speaking only out of the desperation of lust."

Of course I am, she wanted to scream at him. *What else do you expect?*

"What are your true feelings toward me, Erthwoman?"

"D-don't know?" Her teeth chattered.

"How many times have you tried to kill me?"

The tip of his cock moved across her clitoris, sending her into waves of near orgasm—near but not quite.

"Once...or twice?"

"Three times," he supplied.

So why did you fucking ask if you already knew the answer?

"The first time was when you met me," he said. "It was a conditioned response to a perceived threat, completely impersonal. The second time was after our first kiss. The third was after I touched your body."

"If I were you," she managed to quip. "I would watch my step after this."

"Yes," he said dryly. "I expect a full-scale attack is forthcoming."

Tryla whimpered, most undignified. "Just one more orgasm between enemies first?"

"You will have to beg."

"I already did that for you."

"You must do so more abjectly."

"Never," she vowed, though the very words sent hot chills up and down her spine.

She would never submit sexually for any other man...but for him...maybe.

His eyes had an eerie glow. She felt that thrill, knowing he would never hurt her but not sure quite how close to the edge they would go in terms of his dominance. He was holding her down after all and he was having his way with her. She was responding, enjoying the rocket ride as much as he. But what if this ride was more than she was biologically built to take?

"I am your equal, Vharhin, in all things."

"Very well," he said. "Why don't you try the upper position for a while?"

Vharhin promptly flipped the two of them over, lifting her on top of him. He held her waist as he lowered her down onto his erection, centimeter by centimeter, until she was filled with his cock once more.

It felt different this time. The pressure was shifted forward. Her body throbbed, she felt energized. Perhaps the new outlook would make for new roles.

"Looks like I'm in charge now," she teased, bending to kiss his nipple. The tiny bud responded nicely and tightened. He made no effort to resist as she flicked her tongue across the surface.

Her own nipples ached as she imagined him returning the favor.

"We will see about that." His hands shifted slightly on her slender waist, controlling, intent on putting her into motion his way, his pace.

He raised her several centimeters and held her midair.

Oh, hell, not this game again.

"Vharhin, no."

"Place your hands behind your neck," he ordered.

"Why?"

"It accentuates your breasts nicely."

"And if I say no?"

He lifted her completely off his cock.

"All right, all right."

She assumed the position, arching her back, pointing her breasts straight forward. "Are you satisfied?"

"Not until you tell me how it makes you feel."

"Pissed off," she said hotly.

"Indeed. You have been made to obey a male for no other reason than to enhance his visual enjoyment of your flesh."

A dark thrill passed through her, forbidden and wicked.

"You are serving as a sex object, Tryla."

His words nearly pushed her over the edge into orgasm. "Go to fucking hell and die."

"Arch your back further," he said. "Push out your breasts more, for my pleasure."

"I was right about your species, you have no honor."

"Now I want you to touch your breasts, play with your nipples."

Tryla moved her hands eagerly forward, letting the hot flesh of her bosom spill into her gripping fingertips.

She groaned.

"Yes, that's it, entertain me."

"I h-hate you."

"Is it me you hate or is it what your body is doing in response to my suggestions?"

"They aren't...suggestions."

"Aren't they? You think I would really hold you against your will?"

"Yes...no...I don't know." She was confused, not to mention out of her mind with the need to come.

"Vharhin, we both need to climax," she sought to appeal to reason. "And then we need to get back to work."

"You still do not understand that what I am doing to you is my foreplay. I cannot come inside a female until I have conquered her."

"But I'm human. You know it can't work the same as on your own world."

"It did for the ambassador. Madame Duplessix seems to have managed to fulfill the role he needed."

"She's a sex worker, she knows how to act."

"Does it frighten you that you might submit without acting?"

"No. Are you frightened to find out that the whole idea of submission is an act? I've got news for you, the sahvria I met was about as dominant as they come."

"Submission is a complex thing, so is the effect of the pheromones. A spell is cast for short periods of time, though one is never fully free of it. You are already feeling the chemical effect from my skin and my cum."

"I don't feel any different."

"We shall see."

She moaned softly as he continued lifting her and slowly lowering her. "Oh, yes," she murmured. "That's it."

He licked his lips, as though captivated. "I never imagined a female could be like you. You are gorgeously feminine and yet you have the power of a she-cat."

"Does that mean I might get to call the shots after all?" she asked with a grin.

"Only if it pleases me," he said, his voice carrying a distinctly untamed edge.

She might be a she-cat but he was the true beast, reared in an environment impossibly hostile and trying.

"Pinch your nipples," he ordered.

She did so, feeling the jolt through her body.

"Harder."

Tryla gave herself a dose of pain, quick and arousing.

"It's pleasing to watch you writhe."

"Yes..." She moved for him, only for him.

"The men of Erth are fools," he declared.

"W-why?" she asked.

"They have allowed you to run about free and unclaimed."

"No one will own me."

"Yet."

She shuddered.

"I am not the only one stimulated by words of erotic power," he noted.

"It's strictly...coincidence."

Vharhin smiled. He was about to reply when suddenly he went stiff.

Her eyes widened. He was sensing danger. "What is it?"

"There are men in the hallway, getting ready to break in," he whispered. "Are you in control of your faculties enough to resist?"

Adrenaline pumped instantly through her veins. "I never lost control."

"You stay in bed, distract them and I will go behind the door," he said.

Tryla had hoped for a larger part, though there wasn't time to argue. Ignominiously, she took on her role as bait.

Vharhin, still naked, cock half hard, rose from the bed and flattened against the wall, just to the right of the door.

He was barely in place when the antique wood blasted apart, smashed by some kind of energy weapon. Five of them charged in—civvies, masked and gloved, holding heavy blasters.

Subtle bastards, weren't they? That's how she knew they were truly civilians and not undercover agents. You would never hear ErthSec coming. Even the buzz-cut blockheads from ErthDef Intelligence knew better than to inadvertently warn their targets ahead of time.

"Hello, boys, where've you been all my life?" She addressed the lot of them.

Her heart was still pounding double time. Making the change from panting sex slave to femme fatale agent decoy was a little harder than she had expected.

All five of them stood there, momentarily stunned by the sight of Tryla on her side on the bed, elbow bent, head propped up on her hand, her other hand trailing over her hip, inviting the eye to the sweetness of her ripe sex.

One of them, a particularly tall and mean-looking son of a bitch, addressed the others. "Well, lookie...looking for a little entertainment, boys? You all can form a line," he said. "Right behind me."

Damn, she thought, these guys were dumber than they looked.

Vharhin took this as his cue. Much as she hated having to play the helpless sex kitten, she didn't mind having a bona fide sex god fight for her honor.

Of course she had managed to tuck her needle gun under the sheets too, ready to start shooting when the opportunity presented itself.

Which was now.

Vharhin took the big brute from behind. The man went down, victim of a fearsome, super-fast choke hold.

"What the—" One of the other men opened fire. Vharhin spun about, using the brute's body as a shield to absorb the blaster ray.

Before he could fire again, Tryla used the needle gun to take him out.

Vharhin was on the others so fast she didn't have a chance to shoot any more of them. Grabbing two of them, he slammed their heads together, knocking them both out. The other lunged at him simultaneously. Vharhin responded with calculated defensive moves and dropped him to the floor in front of him.

Vharhin faced the doorway, at the ready, in a combat stance. No more attackers came in. He made a quick check in the hallway as Tryla caught her breath.

Watching him at work had been a little dazzling. She knew he was only doing his job but she couldn't help fantasizing that it was something personal.

The supreme Vhrazhian warrior protecting his naked woman. The idea made her pussy tingle though she would never tell him.

The man had quite enough of an ego already.

Vharhin returned and hauled the leader to his feet, treating the man like a straw doll.

"Who sent you?" he growled, grasping the man by the collar.

"I-I don't know," he gasped. "It was a...contract hire."

"A name, give me a name."

The man grimaced. "I can't."

"You might want to reconsider," Tryla said pleasantly enough. "He's with the VISS. You do know what the VISS is, don't you?"

The blood drained from his face.

"Evidently you do know," said Tryla.

"Please...don't hurt me," he sputtered. "I'll tell you what you want to know. He called himself Mr. Facia. We never met him, we just got the blips."

Vharhin pulled him very, very close, eye to eye. "If I find out you lied, I will come looking for you."

"Yes..."

"One more thing," Vharhin said. "If I ever catch you near this woman again, if I find you've so much as looked sideways at her I will make you suffer in ways you cannot imagine. And that goes for your friends too. Do you believe me?"

"Y-yes, sir.

Vharhin released him. "Out," he commanded. "All of you."

"You heard him," the leader said to the others.

Groaning, limping, they made their departure. Vharhin watched them go, fists clenched. His eyes had a wildness in them.

Maybe there was something personal in this for him after all.

Tryla tried to bring him back from whatever trancelike state he had gone into. "If you are done being my knight in shining armor or whatever the Vhrazhian equivalent is, maybe we could actually confer...like partners?"

He frowned. "I told you – if anyone ever threatened you..."

"Yes, I get that. Now would you mind telling me why we didn't arrest them?"

"Because, Tryla, it's my turn to follow intuition. Something tells me we shouldn't trust anyone from this point forward. On your side...or mine. We need to stay independent, interacting with no one. Besides, we can't afford to waste time making reports. We have leads to follow. The Pulsar Club and now this Mr. Facia. Ever heard that name?"

"No. But I do know what it means. Facia is face, in old Italian. Care to wager why a man would call himself 'Mr. Face'?"

"Face could be a reference to facing."

"We have a winner. For bonus points, tell me what that has to do with our case."

His brow furrowed. "You said the sahvria was somehow facing with the ambassador...and with you?"

"You're catching on, Sherlock."

He looked longingly at her body, making her blush head to toe. "I want you, Tryla, I want to claim you but it can't be now."

"I'll keep," she said, moving to gather her clothing.

Keep was an understatement. More likely, she would be steadily simmering just below boiling point.

Chapter Six

Vharhin worked to put the pieces together in his mind. He tried not to think in a strictly linear fashion, front to back, left to right. He was trying to think outside the box, as Tryla put it.

They were only a block from the Pulsar, which meant he didn't have much time. They were taking a transport bubble for speed. Tryla was seated beside him, thigh to thigh.

He had an overwhelming urge to hold her hand, though he knew it was inappropriate at the moment. They were not on an Erth-style date, they were conducting an investigation of the highest importance.

Not that he hadn't postponed it for lovemaking already. How could Tryla affect him so greatly? He had neglected his duty for the sake of the touch of her body, the feel of her hand on his cock, her soft mouth. And later in the room made for pleasure, he had penetrated her body, bringing them both to orgasm.

The case...he had to stick to the case.

What did they know so far? Other than the fact that he and Tryla were intensely compatible sexually and capable of fiery interchanges, intense attraction followed by fierce repulsion?

They knew that the ambassador had been sent to the Pulsar, having exhausted the supply of Erthwomen at Madame Duplessix's establishment. How long had that been going on? Surely it would not go unnoticed at the Embassy? Did he have some accomplice to aid him in his comings and goings? Nazhlan was the likeliest candidate as his chief of staff.

Presumably his sahvria knew something of his visits to the Comfort Zone as well, enough to give Tryla a trail to follow, based on the painting and whatever sort of mental link they had established.

Vharhin could not imagine a Vhrazhian male sharing such things with his mate, but then again, it was even more incomprehensible that the ambassador was having sex with Erthwomen in the first place. A Vhrazhian would never do that.

At least he shouldn't do such a thing.

And that went double for Vharhin.

Had the ambassador and his mate been playing some kind of sexual game? Had they been getting their thrills through his activities? Did he come home and make love to her while downloading his sexual experiences into her brain?

Assuming this was so, how had the game led to the man's disappearance? Had he met with foul play in the course of visiting the Pulsar? If so, what had happened to his body? He and Tryla had been over this before. It just didn't add up.

Something else was off too. The attempt to kill them earlier had been pathetic at best. And the leader of the assassins had given them the name of Mr. Facia much too easily.

It was almost as if he and Tryla were being led, directed step by step. But who would do that and why? His head hurt. He moved closer to Tryla. She smelled good—freshly loved, soft, relaxed. His own edge had been taken off, though he was eager, more than eager, for another dose.

Vharhin had been with women before. No Vhrazhian male remained a virgin once he had achieved adulthood. Experiencing lovemaking at the hands of concubines was part of maturation, a rite of passage. He had been with good ones, the best in the Empire.

They had swooned before him, blinded by his peculiar position.

They gave their all, held nothing back. They were devoted, worshipful, intensely beautiful and rich-skinned, with shimmering dark hair and entrancing eyes, their every movement, their every breath designed to arouse the male of his species.

But none of them held a candle to Tryla.

Her lovemaking was...nonlinear, to borrow one of her phrases. Her passion carried her from one point to another lightning-fast, fighting one second, yielding the next.

Even in their quick, interrupted session, she had been unpredictable, continuing to lure him in, arousing him as though they hadn't yet consummated the act, as though they had barely kissed. It kept renewing itself. He could not get enough. She was everything he had hoped she would be and much more, because now she, and the experience between them, was real.

A new universe had been born, neither Earthly nor Vhrazhian. The skies above it thundered, pregnant with potential. The ground below quaked and rumbled. What seeds would bear fruit? What creatures stalk its terrain? Their whispers, their special jokes, their vocabulary of looks, the rhythm of their dance was the air of that world and its ocean and its sunshine was her heart and his.

There was no certainty now, no predictability, no parts to be played. Was she concubine, mate or some alien fling to be passed through in the wink of an eye? She was all those things and none of them.

She was Tryla. And more and more that was its own end, its own definition. Repeating the word in his head had its own effect, sending his pulse racing. A man should not worship a woman, should not be moon to her sun for fear that he would be lost to her.

At the same time there was rawness in his taking of her, realness that spoke to a depth, a time before any niceties, any rituals and costumes and mating rules. She was

prey, lovingly hunted, brought down for mutual pleasure. She might run from him but not from the truth. She was too brave, too honest.

Honest in a way no Vhrazhian could be.

Did they stand a chance at a relationship? Not without moving mountains. There was between them the gulf of two world views, two ways, two explanations of reality, down to the most minor detail of how to hold a fork, all the way up to the agonizing questions of who had started the war that had slaughtered billions, and why.

If she would just hold on long enough.

If he would do the same.

But larger voices would weigh.

The traditions of his heart, the ways of his family.

And ultimately the voice of the emperor and empress.

The ones who, in his tongue, were called Shodan and Shodana, though to him they were known by quite different names.

* * * * *

Tryla saw the same look in the new woman's eyes as she had seen in those of Madame Duplessix. Pure lust, moth to fire as the woman beheld the figure of the powerful Vhrazhian.

Well, she could damn well find her own Greek god.

"Miss Ananke," Tryla said curtly, having invited the woman to one of the love chambers above the main floor of the packed, dimly lit Pulsar Club. "If you could pay attention to me—the one asking you the questions?"

Ananke Trousseau, a certified club pleasure giver and all-around viper, continued to ignore her fellow female. "You look thirsty," she said to Vharhin. "May I serve you something?"

The turn of her hip, the slow, sexy rasp of her voice, indicated it was her skinny-ass silvery-blue-headed body she wanted to serve and not any refreshments from the bar in her room. "He's just fine," Tryla informed her.

Tryla was not fine. She was off-kilter, she was half in this room and half in orbit—back in bed with Vharhin. She could still feel him inside her, his cock pulsing, throbbing, taking and giving. It was as if the orgasm hadn't quite ended, as if it had exploded the rest of her brain. The attack, shocking and adrenaline-pumping as it had been, had only succeeded in displacing her lust, not ending it.

He owned her senses. She was keenly aware of his being, the sound of his breathing, the way his limbs moved—efficient, powerful and clean. And his scent. She could smell him now in a whole different way. His scent spoke to her, communicated how he made love, told her he wanted more.

More from her and only her.

At least she hoped that was so.

Tryla was a little uneasy about her feelings of exclusivity where the handsome Vhrazhian was concerned. The fact that he was an alien, that she despised his species and that his kind kept women as lowly pleasure objects was part of it. The other part had to do with her heart. She wasn't in the habit of giving it away. She never had. Not to a man.

At least not as far as she knew.

Like any ErthSec agent, her life came in two entirely disjointed parts. The first, prior to the Academy, was a deliberate blank save for a paragraph of background filler given to her after the sweep process. The second consisted of her career and any little bits of personal life she managed to squeeze between assignments.

Tryla had none. It was easier that way. Personal experience meant memories and memories slowed you down.

Maybe one day she would have to dump her memories of Vharhin, safely bury the sex, the incredible explosions within her and reverse this unpredictable rebirth—whole new regions of her body and brain alive, whole new possibilities of emotion. Had she really been that encased in cynicism before him? Had she been that content to be a loner, a workaholic, taking her predictable little excursions twice a year to Janus Moon to swim and hunt with the bow and arrow?

Before and after.

It was black and white versus color, a wafer protein disk versus a juicy bio-steak. Some described that kind of contrast as the basis of love but it was probably chemical and nothing more.

At least it had better be.

ErthSec agents did not fall in love. Not with aliens from races they might soon be at war with...again.

"*You* say he's fine," Ananke challenged, moving on her target with a rhythm as sensual and deadly as the beat of the synthetic club music downstairs. "I say he could be a lot better."

She was on the verge of digging her claws in when Tryla grabbed her by the hair and yanked her away from him. "For the last time, bitch," she snarled. "He's off-limits."

Ananke laughed.

Tryla flushed red, releasing her. She had just revealed quite a bit more of her emotions than she had intended the arrogant little pleasure worker to know.

Vharhin had taken note of Tryla's behavior. He was looking at her with the most curious expression on his face, which did not help the situation at all.

"Don't start with me," Tryla warned.

Vharhin opted to drop the subject, showing rare wisdom where she was concerned. "You were telling us about the ambassador," he redirected Ananke.

"There's not much to tell." Ananke lifted her hands, pulling her long, silky, artificially implanted hair into a topknot. "He saw me twice, for fifteen minutes each. He had this thing for hair. All he wanted me to do for him the whole time was play with it, comb it, tie it and untie it. Square-brained as all get-out but he paid me in gold credits, hugey huge. What is it with you Vhrazhians and hair, anyway?"

Vharhin frowned – he had been staring.

"We will ask the questions," said Tryla, liking this woman less and less with each passing second. "Unless you want to go up on peace-breaking charges."

"For what?" Ananke asked.

"I'll think of something." She made a mental note to find out about the hair thing when she and Vharhin were alone again.

"When was the last time you saw the ambassador?" Vharhin asked her.

"Three nights ago."

Tryla wasn't buying it.

"We will need a complete account of your comings and goings," she said. "Up to and including last night."

"A little hot blipping for you?" winked Ananke. "Is the cop business that tedious? So what's the download, anyway? Has something happened to the ambassador?"

"Why would you ask?" said Vharhin, attempting to play the shrewd detective.

"You're here, aren't you?" she said. "That means something happened."

"Yes...I suppose it does."

Tryla suppressed a grin at his barely concealed sheepishness. Rule number one – when attempting to trap a suspect in his or her answer, never leave them an easy out. Once again, her suspicions were confirmed that this man was not who he said was. He didn't act remotely like VISS, though he was by no means ignorant or weak. He had the strength and heart of a lion but he was no secret policeman.

If he were, he wouldn't have let her make love to him.

If you could call what he had done letting.

It had been more like being overtaken by a storm, completely wrung out, rearranged particle by particle. Whatever she was now...was different and not altogether helpful to the situation.

Truth be told, she was the one who should be feeling sheepish. Instead of acting like an agent, she was playing the part of jealous lover. Ananke was running rings around her.

That wasn't good.

They made a very bad combination.

The way he had reacted against the gang of attackers had been personal, just as this was personal.

Somehow they had found the flip side of hate, which was just as blind and ignorant.

"If you hear anything, contact us."

"Of course." Ananke put out her palm, standard procedure for receiving a personal info blip. One tiny prick from Tryla and the data went streaming toward Ananke's brain.

Ananke nodded when the transfer was complete.

"Repeat it back," said Tryla.

Ananke recited Tryla's comm link numbers, both her agency and personal links. The numbers were burned into her memory.

Tryla's brain felt burned, too, pricked all over with Vharhin's essence and with it the incredible desire to know more. She felt like an addict needing a fresh fix. What went on in his brain? He was not a secret agent but he had secrets.

She had gotten too close and couldn't see the forest for the trees.

"Don't leave the dome," said Tryla by way of goodbye. "We're watching you."

Ananke licked her lips. "I hope so," she said to Vharhin.

Tryla steered him outside the small, plush room and back down the stairs. The music was loud enough to burst an eardrum. The bodies shimmered in the flashing lights as pleasure gasses dropped from the ceiling.

Tryla held her breath.

"We have to cool it," she said when they were back on the street.

"Cool it? I assume this is another of your confusing Erth expressions," he teased.

"It means to cease and desist from all activities," she said, keeping her tone as neutral as possible.

"If you mean no more sex..." He moved his hand to her lower back. "I'm afraid that isn't possible for me."

"It has to be possible." She wormed her way out of his grasp.

"Why?"

"It's putting our investigation in jeopardy, for one thing. We are acting like teenagers, not professionals. Or did you miss sexual ethics training at the VISS Academy?"

"Vhrazhians take a different approach—"

"Give me a break, Vharhin!" She was pissed again. Always the full circle of emotions with this guy. "You aren't with the VISS, so stop pretending."

"How would you know? Have you ever met a VISS agent?"

Tryla unloaded. It had been bound to happen, sooner or later. "Actually, yes, Vharhin. They killed my father and my uncle. They ran the internment camp where I stayed for three months. They killed my brother."

Vharhin's eyes darkened. She couldn't read the emotion. "I didn't know, Tryla."

"I didn't tell you. And don't go feeling sorry for me, my memories were all swept when I joined ErthSec. Standard procedure, no complications, no baggage."

"Still...it is a part of your soul."

"Don't try to be tender, either. I am through with this...this charade."

"You don't mean that, Tryla. We have...a connection."

"Yeah, well, I can get that swept too."

She wished she could interpret his expression. He was obviously reacting, but how?

"I would ask you not to."

"Tell me who you are, then. Give me a reason to think this is anything real."

"I can't, Tryla. I'm sorry."

He might as well have stabbed a knife into her heart. "Goodbye, Vharhin...and have a good life."

She was down the street, largely empty by now, just an hour before sunrise under the dome.

"Tryla, wait." He raced to catch up. "I will tell you, but you must promise never to tell a soul."

"I'm not promising, Vharhin. Either you trust me or you don't."

His jaw tensed. "You are an aggravating woman."

"You're no picnic yourself."

He sighed. "I can't do this on the street. Can we go back to your place?"

"You're not having sex with me."

"We will talk," he agreed.

"Just talk."

"Yes," he said, sounding not in the least convincing. "Just talk."

* * * * *

Tryla apologized about a million times for the state of her living unit, though Vharhin found everything about it beautiful and fascinating. The walls were covered with sketches of various heavenly bodies and star groupings. One, to his great surprise, depicted his own sun system—Vhrazhia Prime and her lesser planets—all painstakingly altered to reflect the environs of the home world.

He was going to ask about that but thought better of it. "You did these yourself?" he inquired instead.

"Just doodlings," she responded dismissively. "They aren't any good."

"They are good in my opinion. I am quite fond of them," he said.

She looked at him strangely.

And I am fond of you, he nearly said.

Fondness...a sentimental emotion verging on love.

That couldn't be true, could it? Love was a complex, ritual-based reality between two persons...of the same species. It took time to develop and it was never based simply on sexual attraction.

Still, time was relative. He had already faced deep things within himself because of her. Perhaps they were more bonded than he realized.

Tryla frowned and turned away, muttering about how blind he must be, she began to move plasticene crates of holobooks, garments and various other odds and ends. She had no furniture to speak of except for a single large hover mattress that floated just above the floor.

As near as he could tell there was just this one room and a small balcony off the 555th floor of her residential cylinder.

"Did you just move in?" he wondered.

"About five years ago. You want something to drink?" She moved, catlike across the room to the dispenser on the wall. She had taken off her boots and her bare feet padded over the thin, soft floor covering. Her hair was wild, tousled, begging to have a man's fingers run through it, teasing, pulling it. The whole of her was an irresistible lure.

How much longer was he supposed to delay orgasm? Vhrazhian males were disciplined but this was pushing the limits.

He ached to have her, to hold and touch her, to kiss away the pain.

Such a long and senseless war but Vhrazhians had suffered too. The VISS, in its day, had served a purpose. Millions of lives had been saved by the intelligence gained.

That was one of the things Tryla did not know, that in the course of martial affairs the Vhrazhians practiced the same sense of obsessive compulsive balance. The war had torn apart each and every soul and decisions had been made as much to minimize losses on both sides as to achieve absolute victory. Learning the enemy's attack plans had avoided battles. In the end, the men in the highest positions had fallen into madness, his grandfather included.

Vhrazhians were not made for such things. The Erthers on the other hand possessed the exact spirit and temperament for war. The arrival of the Harn Menace on the scene had been the most brilliant of gifts, allowing for grand cosmic balance. The Harns could be fought with no compunction, for they were not sentient in any known sense. It was logical, fitting, reasonable to fight them.

"I'll have water," said Vharhin. He was learning to enjoy Erth water, with its flat taste, metallic to his taste buds. Vhrazhian water tended to be pungent in comparison, a bit stale.

Like everything else there.

"I am really not home very much." She continued her litany of self-deprecation as she handed him the glass. "My cleaning droid broke and I haven't gotten around to fixing it."

His nostrils flared, filled with her scent. The proximity was more than he could bear. She continued talking, though he did not hear the words. Taking the glass, almost snatching it, he downed the water in one gulp.

"Thirsty?" she asked, laughing.

He pulled her tight against him, dropping the empty cup on the floor. "Yes, but not for water."

"Vharhin, let go of me!"

He pinned her arms at her sides. "Not until we complete unfinished business."

She moved to deliver a knee thrust to his groin, but Vharhin turned her about, pulling her delectable backside against his burning crotch.

"I am going to enter you again," he vowed. "And I will not withdraw until I have come inside you."

"You can't," she said.

"Why not?"

"I don't want it," she said, squirming quite ineffectually.

With one hand around her waist to hold her still he used the other to unzip her uniform.

"You've seemed quite willing so far."

He stripped the uniform down to her waist. Her breasts heaved. "Well, I've changed my mind."

Vharhin bit down on her neck, inducing a deep moan. He could feel the war within her, the twin needs to fight and surrender.

At the moment he was on the edge with her.

"Go on and resist," he encouraged. "I need it."

"You're sick," she spat. "You're perverted."

"Talk won't do it for me right now." He shredded the material of her uniform, baring her ass. "I need to overcome you."

"I'm not some toy to play with!" She managed to land an elbow to his solar plexus, allowing herself the opportunity to break free.

She only made it a few steps. He had her by the wrist, his grip as hard as steel.

He would not let her escape a second time.

"What are you doing?" she demanded as he pushed her toward the mattress. "You crazy bastard."

Vharhin pushed her down onto her knees. Bending her at the waist, pressing her cheek to the soft material, he prepared her for penetration.

"Oh, stars," she cried, releasing a plaintive wail.

He opened his uniform in seconds. His cock was more than prepared to slip inside her wet, inviting pussy. Tryla sought to fight him off but she only succeeded in bringing them closer together and her ass slamming up into his cock, allowing him to penetrate deep.

He fucked her hard. Tryla called him names, some he knew, some he didn't. There was no mistaking the response of her body, though, the way she had welcomed his cock inside her sex, the way she moaned so sweetly between her curse words.

At last she collapsed beneath him.

Her sudden passivity was the moment he had been waiting for. Releasing a long, low cry from the back of his throat, he shot his cum into her, hot and thick.

She shook and shuddered, whimpering. From his research he knew that the orgasms of Erth males were puny in comparison to those of a Vhrazhian. Their issue of cum was much less and there was no possibility of multiple orgasms.

Tryla had not been given permission to climax but he was not about to make an issue of it. What they shared now would be mutual, animalistic and soul-quenching.

He felt her inner muscles squeeze his cock, her body undulating. He spilled his cum, surging with one thrust after another. A second orgasm followed on the heels of the first. He reached around, clutched her breasts and felt the shivering of her flesh.

She was swearing again, though this time the emotions seemed different.

At last they lay side by side, covered in sweat.

"Much better," he declared.

"What's much better?"

"We will be able to talk more easily now."

She glared at him. "You are really a piece of work, you know that?"

"A piece of what?"

"Never mind," she dismissed. "You do realize you will be charged for the cost of that uniform you ripped, right?"

"Admit it," he said. "You feel a sense of relief. You are already considering how you will find it much easier to be civil to me now that I have assuaged the sexual tension by possessing you."

"Actually, I am thinking how much easier it will be to say goodbye to you when the time comes."

Vharhin felt an inexplicable stab of pain. Rolling on top of her, he slipped unimpeded into her glorious pussy.

"You're still wet for me," he said.

"It's not for you," she insisted.

"Who then? Ananke?" he teased. "That old guy we rode up with in the elevator?"

"Yes, I like old guys."

"He could have been your grandfather."

"So? At least he's human."

"I might not be human, Tryla but I have a heart...I have feelings."

"You don't fucking show them."

"I can't help it if you don't know how to read my kind."

"Stop falling back on your race as an excuse. You want me to care for you as a human? Act like one."

Vharhin moved inside, aiming to put her in her place. "I think I do this like a human."

"Better than any I have ever known," she confessed. "But it's not enough."

"Are you saying you want more?"

"Not from you. We have no future. But if I did want some kind of relationship, it would have to start with honesty and real communication. You have been holding out on me and we both know it."

The accusation in her eyes hit him hard.

He was stunned by his own response.

He had two choices, either retreat now, abandoning any sense of connection with this female or...tell the truth.

Could he trust her?

"What is it with you?" she demanded. "You come on so strong, like you want everything from me and then you take me and then—"

Vharhin cut her off, not wanting to hear any more. "You want honesty, communication?" The time had come to share. "I will give it to you. You are right, I am not an agent. I was sent especially for this mission by my father...the emperor."

Tryla's mouth hung open.

It was the first time he had ever seen her at a loss for words.

After a few seconds her eyes narrowed. "Very funny. Unfortunately, humans don't laugh...when they are being played for fools."

"I'm not playing you for anything, Tryla. I am the Shahar Shodan, First Son and Heir to the throne of the Empire."

She blinked. "No, I am not accepting this."

"You have to." He began to move more quickly inside her, feeling her heat.

"Why, because you're fucking me? Sorry, Sherlock, I am not one of your tame little Vhrazhian females who thinks with her pussy."

"Then use your brain. You know as well as I how important this mission is. Who else do you think the emperor would trust to be his eyes and ears?"

She pushed her pelvis up to meet his, indicating she was not going to back down, physically or any other way. "No offense but if you were my son, I wouldn't send you to investigate a missing credit chip, much less an ambassador."

"That's right, insult me. You're overdue."

"Fine. I lied about the sex," she declared. "It's not that good."

Vharhin growled. Unsheathing himself, he completely removed his glistening cock from her clenching pussy and knelt between her legs.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Teaching you another lesson." He clamped her ankles, spreading her legs wide and bending them upward. She lifted her buttocks and attempted to free herself. Vharhin held her firmly and lowered his head between her thighs.

"What are you...oh, stars, no fucking way!" she hissed once she had guessed his intentions. "You're not doing that to me."

Supposedly Erthwomen enjoyed that kind of stimulation because of the importance of the clitoris as a sexual hot spot. It was said to drive them wild with desire, giving them a most unique kind of orgasm.

But Tryla was not most women, so there was no telling.

He dabbed with his tongue, running it along the sweet crack of her labia. The soft pink lips vibrated under his gentle stimulation. He tasted her fluids.

"I can't believe it," she cried, trying to dislodge him. "I've got an alien tongue inside me. Talk about gross."

"Is it really so gross?"

He pressed his mouth against her, applying pressure, teasing, letting her know he was serious.

"Oh, hell," she said. "This isn't fair."

"Nothing I do is fair to you."

Tryla was sweet to the taste, slightly pungent but quite pleasant. He couldn't believe some Erthmen didn't enjoy this.

Her labia were so delicate, so incredibly responsive. Her fluids continued to flow as he probed inside, using his tongue like a small cock. Her body was quivering. She had traded her struggling for moaning and the harder she moaned, the deeper he penetrated.

She began to buck, arching her back, pressing into him. Vharhin took his time.

He planned to make her pay for her rebellion momentarily, exacting delicious torture.

As soon as her body went slack, he began to tease, lightly licking, denying her the intense stimulation she needed to climax.

"Don't slow down now," she cried, tensing her body.

"You will surrender," he commanded. "You will remain passive."

"The hell with that!"

He held her at bay. She was able to achieve no satisfaction.

Exhausted, desperate, she released the tension from her muscles. "Vharhin...please?" She looked up at him.

"Are you ready?"

She nodded, wide-eyed. He released her ankles. "Open your thighs wide," he ordered. "And keep them open."

"Yes..." She parted her thighs, giving him complete access.

He sat beside her. "With this one finger," he declared, "I own you."

She sucked at her lower lip, her eyes conveying all the hidden emotions. Were they on his own world, were she a woman truly mated to him, they would enact this ritual with binding ropes, with the complex surrender oaths.

This was not Vhrazhia.

She sucked in her breath as he held out his finger. Where would he touch first, what would he do to her?

"You are forbidden to move," he reminded.

"Yes..."

He touched her left nipple.

"You may not close your eyes. You will look at me."

Her cheeks flushed red.

"When I first saw you," he confessed. "When you pulled a weapon on me, I wanted you instantly. I wanted to seize you, pull you against me, kiss some manners into you."

She whimpered as he traced the finger down her belly. "With this one finger," he reminded, "I own you. It is my weapon."

She groaned as he grazed her clit. "I should have killed you..."

"But you didn't. And now you are naked on your back."

"Yes."

He sank his finger deep into her pussy.

She made the mistake of arching her neck.

He pinched her inner thigh. "Hold still," he reminded.

She looked at him in awe. "Please..."

"Please what?"

"Touch me," she rasped.

Vharhin continued probing at will, stroking her clit, alternating his stimulation of her tiny button with gentle penetration of her pussy. Again, he built her steadily but denied her ultimate relief.

The writhing started again. Wantonly she moved against his hand.

He took it away. "Is this how you listen, Erthwoman?"

Tryla was panting. "I-I'm sorry...I won't do it again."

As punishment he made her lie still for several minutes, untouched.

Testing her readiness, he pushed her tight, hot-button nipples.

She whimpered, teeth grinding, but she held her position.

Vharhin resumed playing her body, stroking her soft sex, inducing her to deeper and deeper pleasure. Tryla's breath was short and quick. She put her hands on either side of her head, fists clenched.

This time she did not rebel.

He had his way with her, first with his finger, than again with his tongue. Her body moved in slow motion, as if she were undergoing some kind of pulsing, heartbeat of energy torture – white-hot with the flavor of sex.

Vharhin paused to look up at her possessed, angelic face. "You will come only with permission," he told her. "Like a Vhrazhian female."

She cried out, swearing again, but this time she was begging for him to conquer her in the coarsest possible terms. "Please," she groaned. "Let me...fucking...come..."

Vharhin continued to drink her nectar greedily. It was his way of incorporating her taste, her being into his own. If he could, he would prolong this moment forever but she could only take so much and he was in need, his cock ready to explode between his legs.

He needed to penetrate her and soon.

"Yes, Tryla," he said, speaking the words she longed to hear above all others at this moment. "Do it for me now...give me that gift."

She cried out, clenching her thighs tightly against the sides of his head. As in everything, she had resisted like a Vhrazhian sarn cat, only to turn around and complete the act with ferocity and passion.

Vharhin was in awe of her. He could not get enough of her. Her Erth orgasm continued to rock his world for an eternity. She clawed at his hair. The sensation was like raw energy slicing through him. His heart slammed wildly, on the edge of the forbidden. There was no way she could understand the taboo. No Vhrazhian female would ever touch the hair of a male. It was her hair that was up for grabs, to be tugged and teased and twisted in the fingers of the man.

He had to see Tryla's face, he had to understand her mind. Above all he had to know how she was resisting the power of the pheromone.

He had come inside her. It should have taken effect. Was she different than other Erth females or had Madame Duplessix been less entranced by Vhrazhian male power than she appeared?

At once Vharhin rose, sliding up her chest, the press of her nipples hot and hard against his skin. He found her lips, and coated them in her own feminine liquids. She made sweet noises, hungry noises.

Vharhin cupped his hands beneath her buttocks, drawing her in. Nothing could be allowed to separate them now. She grabbed for his cock.

He growled. Was there no end to her independence, her desire to take the role of hunter?

"Stop fussing," she chided. "I want to do something."

It was Vharhin's turn to lie on his back. She went unabashedly to her knees and pushed apart his muscular thighs. Quite inappropriately, because it was not at his instigation. Paradoxically, she was taking control for the sole purpose of pleasuring him, for submitting the caresses of her mouth.

"So beautiful," she murmured, kissing the tip of his cock.

His hand went to the top of her head, to those glorious, tousled locks. He gritted his teeth, knowing he would not be able to hold out long. "This...is not...how it's done."

"What? You Vhrazhians don't like having your cocks sucked? You enjoyed it fine in the air car. I would have expected this to be right up your alley—naked woman, humbly serving and all that crap," she teased.

"A Vhrazhian female performs sex acts as she is told. And she most certainly does not provide sarcastic commentary."

"Whatever," said Tryla. With that she ran her tongue along the base of his cock.

He gasped, clenching his fist. Never had a woman applied her tongue so...aggressively. It was scandalous, it was unseemly...it was good.

"So you want me to stop, then?"

"Far be it from me to interfere with an ErthSec officer in the performance of her duty."

Tryla smiled broadly then popped the head of his cock into her mouth. It felt different than the first time in the air car. She had been tremulous then, almost shy. This time she was wanton, warm and willing...surprisingly comfortable.

He relished in the differences of her human biology. The temperature of an Erther's circulatory system was slightly lower. He had wondered how that might affect the pleasure, being in a mouth not quite as hot as a Vhrazhian woman's.

What he felt more intensely was his own heat and a sense of filling her, connecting with her. And she was more than making up for things with the vigorousness of her motions.

Up and down, applying wicked suction, like he was some sort of confection to be savored. A Vhrazhian woman sucked in a much more delicate way, practiced but with too much awe and a sense of worship.

This woman loved what she was doing but she was not afraid of breaking tradition.

She took him willingly to the back of her throat. He was too long to fit entirely inside, so she wrapped her cool, Erth fingers around the base—clutching, expectant.

"If I come," he warned, "you'll be amplifying the effect of the pheromones."

Tryla came up for air. "I'm a big girl, Vharhin. You will come in my mouth and that's final. As for your sacred pheromones, they aren't having much effect on me so far."

She was right of course. Would it take longer because she was human?

She had a little line of saliva running from the corner of her lips. She looked adorable, so fierce and determined in her desire to serve.

He could cover her face, her entire body with kisses. But that would have to wait.

"Are you going to keep being stubborn?" she wanted to know. "Or are you going to let me give you the same gift you gave me?"

"I won't argue anymore," he breathed. "Mustn't cause any more diplomatic incidents."

Tryla returned to her ministrations. This time she began with his testicles. They were tight and high at the moment. He had five or six good orgasms worth of seed at the moment. He doubted the Erthwoman could take it all, though she would surely try.

One of the things outsiders did not understand was that for a Vhrazhian woman, serving her mate's sexual pleasures was a fairly intense undertaking, time-consuming and mentally demanding. This was an important reason why Vhrazhian women did not assume roles in the outside world. They simply had less energy to apply to other endeavors than one of these Erth females.

Tryla's kisses were small and maddening and curious. She was trying to discern the similarities and differences with her species. She was truly shameless.

He uttered a mild curse in his native tongue as she dug her nails in, taunting. "Careful, woman."

"Your royal jewels will hold up just fine. They aren't glass, you know." Before he could utter a reply, she made a dive for his cock, this time seizing complete control.

Her mouth was hot and fast as she bobbed her head. The little beauty was going to induce a climax, like it or not.

Vharhin's muscles tensed. He stretched his legs. For a split second he felt what it might be like to be a female—to be taken, the male one step ahead, setting the pace with his lust, leaving no choice but to respond.

That second was indeed split, shattered and gone, replaced with a new reality. Unleashing a mighty roar, the orgasm released and Vharhin reveled in his maleness once more, his twin identities of prince and agent of his government. Just as he had been...but more so. In ways he could not describe.

Tryla drank him deep, absorbing the hot flood of his cum. She did not flinch, did not blanch. She was too hungry for his essence, too eager...too sincere.

He knew her soul in that instant, as if he had ever doubted her nobility.

Vharhin savored the feeling when he ejaculated, and held himself to a single orgasm. It was difficult because the need was so great—the desire to bond, to release his essence into hers. But he did not wish to overtax her system.

She continued to suck at him because he was hard.

He would be hard forever if she kept this up.

"Tryla, come here..." He gently urged her to release his cock, glistening and still throbbing, from her mouth.

She crawled up the length of the mattress, curling against him. Her head went to his shoulder, her fingers splayed across his chest. This act of intimacy, her body relaxed and trusting, affected him more deeply than words could say.

"Vharhin?" she whispered.

"Yes..." He stroked her hair. He could not say her name—it felt too impersonal now. Everyone used that name. He needed something special. Were they mated on Vhrazhia, they would pick mating names.

"I'm curious about something."

He smiled. The Erthwoman was always curious. Her mind never stopped working, never ceased questioning. "About what?"

"If you're the high mucky-muck prince, why didn't Nazhlan treat you like anything special?"

"That one is easy," he explained. "Nazhlan has never seen my face. No one among my people has, except my immediate relatives."

"Wow." She trailed a finger idly over his stomach. He drew a breath, knowing what this would lead to. "So have you lived in a palace for your whole life or something?"

Vharhin laughed. "Hardly. I have been to various training academies, have traveled the Empire, have served in the Imperial Star Forces. But I have done so under an assumed identity, as a son of a lesser noble."

"But why?"

"It is tradition, born of practical wisdom, like all things Vhrazhian. By concealing the identity of the Shahar Shodan, he is allowed to grow and test his mettle in a more normal fashion. If my identity were known, all would be forced to yield to me. I would mature with a monstrous sense of ego."

"Worse that you have now?" she teased. "That's hard to imagine."

"You are not the first to say so. I must admit, there have been times I wished I could use my rank to make life easier. At other times, however, I have wished for a more ordinary life. So much is expected of me. Take this mission. I am to be my father's eyes and ears. I am to protect our interests, seek to avert war, doing whatever it takes."

Tryla kissed his collarbone. She was aroused too—he could smell it. "You must feel very alone. That's a lot on your shoulders."

Acting of her own accord, she climbed over him and straddled his lap. Her soft sex enveloped his flesh, impaling him in one smooth, cool motion.

He raised a brow, feigning disapproval. "What do you think I am, Erthwoman, some sort of stud to be mounted at your convenience?"

"Actually, yes." She grinned mischievously. "But don't you worry. We're just talking."

"I'll give you talking." He seized her ribs, tickling her. She began to laugh, the sound more harmonious to his ears than an ancient Vhrazhian harp, the most perfectly attuned instrument in creation.

With that he flipped her over on her back. "Much better," he said.

More laughter as she squirmed deliciously beneath him. He bit her nipple and she cried out again, feigning displeasure. For a split second he looked down and it was perfect—the beautiful, intelligent, playful female, mutual lust and companionship, his cock happier than it had been with any Vhrazhian consort.

But there was no equilibrium in this. Projecting forward, there could only be trouble. Outside pressures and impossible demands to crack them apart. And the internal pressures were even more dangerous.

There could be no playing with Tryla, not for long. Even now he felt it in his head. He was keeping it at bay, forgetting from moment to moment as he could but it was there—the need to release the pheromones, to bathe his cortex, to retune his orgasm...for her.

He had no clue how she would respond. Her biology was not identical. She might not fall to his will and desire, she might not become his treasured captive mate.

And if she did, if such a thing were even possible in this universe, would she not be miserable, losing her freedom?

"Vharhin, what's wrong?"

He shook away the feelings, the worries. "Nothing, Tryla, I was just savoring you."

She reached up. "Savor later, make love now."

He laughed and thrust his cock deeply into her.

For the first time in his life, he cursed the order of things, praying against all reason that time itself would stop, freezing them here...and now.

His cock plunged deep and she moaned. Heat melted ice. Passion knew no freezing. And time knew no mercy.

When this act was complete, when he had managed to ease his lust enough for clear thought, he would make the needed break. Clean and quick. Better for both of them in the long run.

One day she might thank him, though probably not.

A woman like Tryla did not forgive easily. She was too proud, too fiery. It was one of the things he liked about her.

Liked...not loved.

Never love, not in the course of a million galaxies, each as vast and indifferent...and cruel as this one.

Chapter Seven

Tryla woke up first. The glint of light off her balcony was sharp and red. It was nearly sunset. Extricating herself from the tangle of arms and legs that was her and Vharhin's joint reality, she rose from the mattress to see what time it was.

Seventeen-three, a half an hour to darkness.

They had slept all afternoon.

Real sleep...when was the last time?

Tryla was so used to the stasis machine that she had wondered if she was capable of slipping into natural unconsciousness. The dream state, as it used to be called.

Vharhin had lulled her with his steady heartbeat. She lay upon his chest, fascinated with the slow and distinctly alien beat. She imagined drums on his native world, strong men beating upon the tightly drawn skins of mysterious creatures. She wished she understood more. She wished she could see through his eyes.

Vharhin had helped her fall asleep...

Incredible. Hours in the completely helpless sleep state—no stasis waves to maintain outside vigilance, no blip links to the outside world.

Sleep was dangerous and mysterious.

And wonderfully decadent.

What fine investigators they made, lounging about her living unit instead of finding the ambassador. Though she supposed it was unavoidable. After leaving the chief's office they had worked all yesterday and through the night. Then they had come back here at dawn and commenced "talking", which translated into passionate sex hour after hour until they both were too exhausted to proceed.

How many times had Vharhin climaxed? At least as many as she had. Men weren't supposed to be able to do that. Not that he was a man in any sense of the word she was familiar with.

Look at him, lying there on his back, completely self-satisfied and in command of his domain. And why not? He had enjoyed her—the complete passion of her body and soul.

Was he really the prince? The story seemed incredible but Vharhin wouldn't lie. He wasn't the type.

That was her gut instinct and she always went with her gut.

Still naked, Tryla opened the portal and went out onto the balcony. Her living cylinder was one of a dozen or so in this sector. The cylinders reminded her of floating needles—vertical spindles directly above the bio-sector. This particular cluster

represented an exclusive zone, reserved for officials from Gov and Def and Sec and OpServ.

Her own living chambers were reasonable by crowded Erth standards, approximately twenty-three square meters all to herself.

Not much compared to the ambassador's palace, though. The man's closet would be a step up from this. She could only imagine the Shodan's palace. During the war the soldiers used to joke about the victory dances they would do on the emperor's floors when Vhrazhia was conquered.

When the last Vhrazhian was dead, the saying went, then the sun would shine happily over Erth. They had never achieved their objective. She shivered, thinking, *What if they had?* Vharhin would never have lived to meet her.

Tryla leaned over the railing. She watched the evening shuttles float by, their slow progress punctuated by dabbing bursts of energy from mecha-birds flapping their artificial wings against the background of the dome sky. Always the same perfect, unquestioned hues, blue in the day and black at night. Erth forever, my planet right or wrong.

For the first time in her life she wondered what it might have felt like to be on the other side. When Erth forces went to Vhrazhian colonies, weapons gleaming, hate on their minds, the desire for revenge eating at their souls.

So many atrocities, grievances enough for both sides.

"Woman, do you want the whole world to see you naked?" Vharhin was behind her with a sheet. He cloaked her shoulders and wrapped the material tightly about her waist.

She leaned back against him, reveling in his strength. He smelled of him and her, a potent, not unpleasant combination. "We don't have nudity taboos on Erth," she said.

"That's fine for everyone else," he grumbled. "But I won't have the entire population of the city ogling you. Besides, someone's liable to have an accident. Do you have any idea what a distraction you are?"

Tryla doubted she was all that distracting but the sentiment was sweet. Smiling broadly, she turned and circled her arms about his thick neck. She had to stand on tiptoes. "Are you sure this isn't a personal issue for you?"

He frowned. "I don't see how."

"You don't want anyone else to see me naked because you want me for yourself."

His eyes glinted, reflecting the Erth sunset. "A man from any race would be most foolish not to want you, Tryla."

Vharhin's words melted her, getting to her in places she really ought to keep off-limits. "Oh, baby," she murmured.

She kissed his chest, lightly nibbling and sucking. "I want you inside me again. I want that magnificent Vhrazhian cock fucking me silly."

Tryla was wetter than she had ever been in her life. Her skin was red-hot. She felt ready to ignite.

Vharhin's hands gripped her upper arms. "Tryla...no..."

His rock-hard erection brushed her thigh. "But..."

"I can't," he said somberly.

She circled her fingers around his cock. "Seems like you can to me."

"You do not understand." He stepped back, leaving her cold.

Her soaring emotions took a nose dive, like a mecha-bird gone awry. Rejection was not something Tryla had ever taken to well, no matter what the reason.

Tryla responded by instinct, lashing out, self-protecting. She did not choose her words judiciously. "Oh, I understand just fine, *alien*. I'm not submissive enough, is that it? Or was I just some trophy for you, a little war story to share back at the court?"

"That isn't it at all. I'm concerned with a buildup of pheromones in your system."

She pushed his hand away from her shoulder. "Don't insult me. I told you, never spare my feelings. Was I a good fuck at least?"

"You were much more."

"Go to hell," she spat, storming across the room to the sanitizing chamber. "Better yet, go back to Vhrazhia—it's the same damn thing."

Tryla slammed the chamber door behind her and turned the overhead beams on full—more than enough to blast away the germs...and the tears.

She was angrier with herself, than with him. Why had she let herself care about him and the things they were doing together? How stupid was that? If she couldn't trust Erthmen, why would she expect more from an alien—a Vhrazhian at that?

It was a relationship doomed from the start. A Vhrazhian wouldn't want her and why should she want a Vhrazhian?

There wasn't any point in hating him—he was who he was. Shame on ErthGov for signing the treaty, though, because there would never be peace with this race. The two species didn't belong together, except maybe in fighting the Harns. But that was kind of a no-brainer, wasn't it, lining up side by side to blast swarms of deadly space locusts intent on consuming every living molecule in their path?

Hardly the kind of bonding experience that made for deep emotional unions. They would be right back at it, Vhrazhia and Erth, as soon as the Harns were dealt with.

Tryla was feeling worse by the minute. She was not in the mood to be touched, at least not by the cleansing beams. Her skin wanted to be in contact with his. Vharhin's hands on her breasts, molding, insolent but tender, commanding yet strangely compassionate. He was a complicated lover. He demanded her surrender, obliterated her will one moment only to compel her to receive the slavish attentions of his tongue the next.

Vharhin had opened a catalog of orgasms within her. No two had been alike and she had the distinct impression there was no limit to the variety he was capable of inducing. Were all Vhrazhian males like this or was he something special?

He was the heir to the throne—inheritor of a dynasty older than anything Erth civilization could imagine. How many concubines could a man like that have? What sort of mate would he attract? Some princess from a far-off world, reared in a tower in a palace surrounded by sand and rock? Reared for gilded pampering, the plushest of slaveries.

Not exactly Tryla's style. Why had he gotten involved with her in the first place? Why had she let him?

Vharhin was still on the balcony when she emerged from the chamber. He had the sheet wrapped about him like a toga. His hands were on the railing as he studied the traffic, his back to her. Such a magnificent, commanding form. If only he could be relied upon. If only he were an Erthman.

If only she could afford to go to him and kiss him, allowing him to wrap his arms around her and make everything feel okay again.

"Get yourself sanitized and we will get back to work," she said in as neutral a tone as possible.

He regarded her. "We shall proceed as if nothing happened?"

"Nothing did happen," she said curtly. "You have five minutes to get ready. Don't keep me waiting."

Vharhin nodded. "I'm glad you are willing to be reasonable."

Reasonable? Is he that clueless?

She kept herself together until he had shed the sheet and entered the chamber. Not saying a word, taking the cup he had used for water this morning, she flung it against the wall. It did not even have the decency to crack.

Such was modern life, impenetrable, sterile and unfair as hell.

* * * * *

They stopped off for something to eat at a robo diner near the air car garage. A multi-armed server droid took their order and generated the desired items from its potbelly, right at the table.

Tryla was not hungry but she forced herself to eat a bowl of soy soup and a plate of metabo crackers. Vharhin, to her annoyance, consumed a double order of bio-steaks, rare.

"A most unusual flavor," he said, slicing the meat from the artificial T-bone with his laser knife.

"It's processed sludge and plasticrete," she dismissed. "No one but a tourist would eat that."

"Your meal, on the other hand, is more suitable for an invalid," he said.

Maybe I am, she thought. I'm nursing a broken heart.

"I eat light when I'm going to work. I might have to fight. I might very well die. Don't want that crap in my stomach when I do."

"The Vhrazhian digestive system is quite rapid, actually –"

She cut him off before he could get wound up. "Spare me another lecture on the superiority of your race, will you?"

What pissed her off most was that the man had gotten so ravenously hungry using by her body and now he was chowing down on her planet's food.

She'd bet he wouldn't let her take those liberties on his world, fucking and eating as she pleased.

"Actually, I think our two races are equal in many ways."

"Hah," she snorted. "What would you know about equality? You keep your women in chains."

"We do not ordinarily restrain them," he said, nonplussed. "Neither with metal nor any other material. We allow them to reach their fulfillment under male protection."

"Separate but equal, yes, we had that on Erth too. They used to apply it to women, and before that it was people with different languages and skin colors. Discrimination is still discrimination."

"And you think it's so different on your world now, Tryla?"

"Of course it is. How could you miss it?"

"We see what our nature allows us to see. How do you think your fellow Erthers look at me? Am I equal in their sight, do I deserve the same opportunities as far as they are concerned?"

Tryla frowned. "It's not the same thing. There are reasons why we feel as we do about Vhrazhians...because of the things you've done, how you live."

"Have you been to Vhrazhia?"

"No," she admitted.

"Have you studied our ways firsthand?"

"I have been to the Embassy and I've dealt with you. That's enough."

"Tell me your views have not been altered in any way by your new experiences. Tell me you've not uncovered prejudices in yourself?"

Tryla did not like where this was going. Did he have to make it his mission to keep putting her off balance all the time?

"As of this morning," she replied carefully. "I would say my worst opinions about the callousness and rudeness of your race have been confirmed. It's no longer prejudice but experience."

"And after my experience of you and your people, the snide remarks, the sneers and cold glares on the street, the endless sarcasm—I am supposed to fall all over myself trying to emulate you?"

Tryla sipped at her soup. "You know, I can really see why someone would have wanted to do something nasty to your ambassador. All he would have had to do was wander into a pub somewhere and open his mouth."

"Is that what you think happened?" he asked seriously.

"No," she said, more than happy to shift gears back to the case. "I think Ananke lied to us. I think she saw him that last night. I think she knows what happened to him."

"Why didn't you detain her then?"

Because I was preoccupied with you, she thought.

"I wanted to give her time so we could see what she was up to, maybe learn her contacts."

"She might have run off by now."

"No, she's still at the Pulsar."

"How do you know?"

"The transponder I needled her with was a two-way. I can monitor her with a pocket tracer. She has been there the whole time. She's been working, talking to clients, performing, nothing suspicious so far. I think she's trying to outwait us."

"Do you intend to keep waiting?"

"No, I think we need to shake her up, see what comes loose at this point."

"You must be very good at your job," he said.

She glowed at the compliment, hating herself for caring about his opinion. "Don't expect me to say the same for you. For one thing I don't even know what your real job is."

He smiled wryly. "To keep an eye on you."

Tryla's cheeks heated slightly...and her pussy too.

He had kept more than an eye on her so far.

"Come on, Sherlock." She rose to her feet. "We've got work to do."

"I'm not done with my steak."

"Yeah, you are, you're going to be sick enough as it is and the last thing I want is someone retching in my air car."

"Tell me something," he said when they were back inside the vehicle. "Why don't you have a mate?"

"Why don't you have one?" she asked, turning the question back on him.

"My mate must be chosen by the Privy Council at the time of my coronation," he said.

"Sounds romantic."

"Romance is not a concept known to Vhrazhians."

"Nor to ErthSec agents."

Vharhin's lips curled in what appeared to be amusement. "You haven't found a man strong enough, that's all."

"Please." She rolled her eyes. "All you men are alike—from any planet—you all think it's about strong-arming a female."

"There are many kinds of strength," he pointed out.

"I would agree, but that would undermine my ongoing efforts to hate you."

"I'm sure I will give you renewed cause before too long."

"You always do."

"I would hate to disappoint you."

"A woman like me can't be disappointed," she assured him, though she wondered how true that was anymore. Until Vharhin had come along, she had never expected anything where men were concerned. Now there was a standard—a gold one. Too bad the son of a bitch had managed to break it already.

* * * * *

Ananke was working in a containment tube on the main floor of the club when they found her, her lithe, shimmering body bathed in black light as she writhed against the sides of the hollow crystal chamber. It was an average-sized tube, approximately one meter across and two meters high. It left room for lots of naked gyrations and intriguing presses of her pliant flesh against the smooth, unyielding material.

Vharhin noted the intent behavior of her human audience. Drooling males, and a few females, were putting credit chips into slots on the surrounding countertop, trying to keep the tube turned in their direction. Ananke's eyes were closed. She was aroused, judging by the pointy, silver nipples and the quickness of her breathing.

Vharhin must have been eying her a little too intensely, as he drew an acerbic comment from Tryla.

"If you want to fuck her, you'll have to wait until the case is over. We have a thing about sex with suspects here on Erth."

"That is not my intent."

What he had been thinking about was how Tryla might look, stripped bare, performing under the lights, inside the sexy tube, all these men watching.

The last part left him cold. He did not want other men watching her, either with or without her clothes.

"Don't lie to me," she said. "I know you want her. And why shouldn't you? You're a single prince, on a wild, alien planet so why not live a little? Sow some wild oats."

"Some what?"

"Wild oats, it's another old expression I picked up in my studies. It's my hobby, remember?"

He pursed his lips. These expressions were taxing his brain, as was the music of the club—a clanging metallic beat accompanied by pulses of light and rolling, colorful gas clouds on the floating dance floors, each of them crowded with swaying, yearning bodies.

Vharhin found it unbelievable. The sun had barely set and these humans were already in the throes of passionate movement, opening themselves to any stimuli they could find.

"Tryla, I sense that you may be jealous," he said with paternal concern. "I know that Vhrazhian females are prone to it, as they are to all strong sentiments concerning the males in their lives and I don't think you are any different, especially with the dose of pheromones you have already been exposed to. If it is any consolation, I would choose you to sexually dominate over any Erth female, if I could risk doing so again."

She glared at him in utter disbelief.

"Did I say something wrong?" he asked.

"No, not at all," she said, though her body language told a different story. "I am just so overwhelmingly relieved, Vharhin. You have no idea how broken up I was, thinking you had just used me up and thrown me away. Now I know I was one of a kind and that if you were ever in the market for a disposable female again, you would certainly consider my application."

Vharhin dissected the statement. "This is Erth sarcasm, is it not?"

"No." She rolled her eyes. "Not at all."

"It is," he determined. "And I do not find it attractive on a woman."

"A thousand pardons, master."

Ananke's dance was coming to an end. Her gyrations slowed in time to the music. She finished, panting, on one knee, her head bent forward, her lustrous hair covering her face and breasts.

The position was alluring, feminine. Tryla would do better, though, regardless of her lack of formal training.

"We will speak to her now," he declared as the containment tube dissolved, the material dissipating into the misty air of the club.

"I will speak to her. You will listen."

"On what basis do you claim such authority?"

"Because I'm a fucking cop," she snapped. "And you're a crown-wearing, fancy-pants dandy boy."

She walked off. He watched her ass—insolent, taunting. He ached to shove his cock into her tight canal, making her squirm and yelp. He would tease her clitoris with his finger, making her push her ass against him, cursing him, screaming for him to do it harder.

He would make her suffer first. He would tease and delay and win every concession he wanted. She would surrender her body, acknowledging his position with complete respect, like a sweet and well-behaved concubine.

Ananke looked pleased to see them, though only in a predatory sense. She had enjoyed her game with them yesterday and she wished to play it again.

Vharhin sensed much irrationality in her mind. His sense of danger rose to the forefront. Catching up to Tryla he conveyed his warnings.

“What was your first clue, Sherlock?” she replied, maintaining her hostile attitude. “Was it the bunch of goons that jumped us last night or maybe it’s the way club security is eying us right now like they would like to rearrange our faces courtesy of management?”

Vharhin had seen the tall, muscular men as well. They were hairless and had electro receivers built into their ears. Their eyes were an unnatural color of gray, indicating some kind of computer linkup. He counted three of them in the shadows at the edge of the room.

Two fell in behind them as Ananke took them down a long corridor—black metal, fitted with sealed, white portals.

“Would it be wise to call for assistance?” said Vharhin.

“We could, if you want a lot of uniform clunkers running around here turning everything upside down.”

Vharhin took her meaning. Any clues, any chance to win Ananke’s cooperation would be lost. “Tryla...” Their footsteps fell on the polished floor, rhythmic as a heartbeat. “If anything happens to us, I want you to know—”

“There’s nothing I want to hear from you,” she cut him off. “I mean it.”

Ananke’s personal quarters were both sumptuous and eclectic. She had large pod pillows at least a meter across, in various neon colors, piled on the floor along the walls. They hummed with life, awaiting orders to assume whatever shape and formation might be required by their owner.

The walls were cut glass, forming various kaleidoscopic patterns that changed continuously. The ceiling was fitted with pleasure piping—intricate arrangements of ancient brass pipes with tiny holes for release of sounds and smells. A recessed pool in the center contained shimmering amber nektar, a nano-fluid that could take on any flavor and texture desired for consumption.

One could also make love in the nektar. Vharhin had blipped information about all these things during his journey to Erth, though he had never experienced them. To a Vhrazhian they represented decadence and impracticality.

“You do not approve of my living space?” said the naked Ananke.

Vharhin took note of her ability to read the lines of his forehead. Vhrazhian expressions were subtle and were not understood without practice. “It is not up to us to

approve or disapprove of the lifestyles of other races," he said, directing the remark as much to Tryla. "Unless there is grave danger involved."

"That danger can be spiritual," said Tryla pointedly. "Not just physical. There are times when we must speak up for right and wrong."

"What I would say," Vharhin redirected the conversation to Ananke, "is that a Vhrazhian male would never decorate in such a way as to allow any distractions from the single greatest object of beauty in the universe, which is the female."

"The key words being female and object," said Tryla. "Which on Vhrazhia are one and the same."

Ananke took a small green pill from a hover tray as it levitated by. "You two have obviously had a busy day," she said.

"That's not your concern," said Tryla.

"Busy how?" asked Vharhin. His senses were still very much alert. The portal had closed behind them, the guards were outside. There were no apparent exits, though he wondered about a particular section of the glass along the back wall which was a tiny bit more refractive of the light than the rest.

Ananke swallowed the pill and sighed, her lips curling in immediate satisfaction. "You copulated like wild things, trying to work out the tensions. But there was too much between you. You hit the wall and bounced off, now you're both a wreck."

"Please," said Tryla dismissively. "Mind if we have a look around? Too bad if you do."

Tryla began to inspect the room. Vharhin had a sense about her words—there was something to pursue here. Was it intuition? Nonlinear thinking, or was he indeed a wreck? Certainly he had felt better. A Vhrazhian male did not ever fail to meet an obligation and he most certainly would not betray a female's trust. Try as he might to convince himself he had acted honorably with Tryla at every step, he could not escape the feeling that he had done her a very great ill.

"What is this wall you speak of?" Vharhin asked.

"You tell me. Males, females...they don't think the same."

Especially not Vhrazhian males and human females.

"But the language of love is universal, is it not?" he said.

Ananke laughed. She stretched her arms overhead, the motions those of an instinctive and expert dancer, one who communicated best without words. He would use that to pursue and trap her.

"Sex is universal," she said. "The heat of body to body."

"And yet you like it best when men watch, not when they touch."

She did a pirouette, rising to tiptoes. "Do you like what you see...male?"

"You are pleasant to look at," he replied.

Tryla snorted. Pulling a monitoring device from her belt, she began to examine the pillows. Good, her jealousy was exactly what was needed.

"Your woman sounds unhappy," said Ananke.

"She's not my woman."

"But you've had her."

"What do you think?" said Vharhin. He walked a fine line, playing this game without actually betraying the sacred details of his relationship with Tryla. She was angry and she would be angrier still, assuming she did not figure out what he was up to.

Maybe she already had?

"I think you'd like your hands in my hair," she said. "I think you'd like me at your feet."

"That is where females belong."

He could feel Tryla bristling.

Ananke continued her motions, the bending of arms and legs, a gradual expansion of her space, sexual opening and flowering. She was indeed communicating much. Strength and vulnerability and beneath that the core of something huge that she was dancing around. Something hidden.

And it had everything to do with the ambassador.

Ananke spoke from the place of the dance. "You wasted your time with her, you know."

"Did I?" he said. "And why is that?"

"She's ErthSec. They have no hearts, no memories. They can't love, they can't feel, can't serve."

"And you can?"

"Look at me." She was breathing quickly. "I'm a woman, nothing else. I live to please. I have to please."

"You are a disgrace to the gender, is what you are," Tryla snapped.

Vharhin knew he must act immediately and forcefully. Everything depended on it. "Agent Tryla, that is enough."

She looked at him, the tiniest trace of uncertainty in her eyes.

He met her with pure Vhrazhian resolve, the living embodiment of steel and duty. He must convince Ananke that this was no act but a genuine show of power over Tryla. "You will not speak without permission, Tryla. You will not interfere in my investigation again."

Tryla's mouth formed an oval. For a moment he believed it was all real. He longed to hear her say yes, to fall at his feet, declaring her love. But she was not Vhrazhian and she was not his.

"Whose investigation?" Tryla snapped. "You arrogant vooz?"

"Mine, Tryla." His voice resonated across the room. Ananke felt it and that was all that mattered. "I am the male and you are the female. You will kneel now on the floor and you will wait until I tell you what to do next."

Vharhin was pointing downward.

Come on, Tryla, play along...you're the real cop here, jump into the game. It's only a role.

One heartbeat passed and then another. Ananke was not breathing, she was waiting, everyone was waiting, the whole damn universe...

Tryla knew in her head that Vharhin's sudden dominant trip was an act, but damn, he could be convincing when he wanted to be. Obviously he was trying to play Ananke. She had a thing for Vhrazhian men and was vulnerable to manipulation. Whether or not she had ever done more than model her hair for the ambassador, it was a safe bet that Vharhin was ten times the male specimen.

He was skillfully drawing her in, keeping total command of the situation. He might well be able to crack through her cynical exterior and get her to reveal the truth. But part of that involved letting Ananke see Tryla as a submissive rival for Vharhin's attention.

Thus would Ananke be lured by her ego and her own lust. Tryla knew all this but her feelings rebelled at every level. It shouldn't be a big deal to act submissive for ten minutes to solve a case this big. She should be laughing on the inside at the joke of it all.

Instead she was torn up, filled with rage at Vharhin for putting this demand on her. He had no right, not after what he had done to her, playing with her body, teasing at her heart and then abandoning her. He didn't deserve to lord it over a ghrushi, much less an intelligent female.

Then there was the most disturbing part which was based on fear. What if she couldn't get back up off her knees? What if the weak and needy person inside her were to end up whimpering and crying for his attention? What if she promised to do anything, be anything to win his approval, to get another chance?

The brain drains at psycho-rehab had warned her she was going to be vulnerable at points, not having her childhood to reflect on. All those memories, apparently good or bad, were part of what helped us move on and become independent adults able to form healthy relationships.

She had told them to screw off and canceled the rest of her adjustment appointments. And she would have been fine if she had not run across Vharhin. He was too different and he didn't play by the rules.

Tryla bent her knees. The floor was soft. Her heart thundered but she had to trust Vharhin, that he wouldn't hurt her, that he would protect her. She might as well be frigging naked down here.

Vharhin approached. She could smell his heat, the scent of his body. His cock was semi-hard under his uniform. Hadn't he told her at some point that a Vhrazhian

controlled his cock far better than a human and that only his mate could have such an effect?

Hadn't he said in no uncertain terms she could never be that mate?

Was this part of the act or was he just trying to lay it on thick for Ananke?

So far he had not shown much control around her at all. And, for her part, she had not been responding as a cool and collected professional.

His hand went to her head, stroking. "Your obedience pleases me," he said softly.

Shivers passed through her.

Was he just acting now too?

Every fiber of her being strained to rebel. If ever in the history of the Erth a female needed to tell a male to take a flying leap into a black hole, this was it.

Unbidden by conscious will, her lips pressed against his crotch. His cock expanded in reply, making her heart soar. Did she dare to hope? Tryla felt weak all over, warm and glowing and very un-agent-like. She laid her head against his powerful thigh. It was so nice to let a male take over, just for a second, leaving her nothing to worry about but making him happy.

Tryla was wet between her legs. Her nipples burned. She wanted to give her body to him again—she wanted to be his relaxation, the relief from all the stress of his mission, the burdens of the Imperial crown, the weight of his own sexuality, needing to keep everything in check so a bunch of Privy Councilors could pick his bride.

Ananke was close and in heat.

"Take me," she whispered, on all fours at Vharhin's left hip. "In front of her. Make her watch."

Vharhin seized Ananke by the hair and pulled her firmly, but not forcefully, up onto her knees. "You are a cruel woman."

"Yes," she hissed, eyes wild. "Punish me for it."

"I will. But not as you imagine. You will tell me the truth. You will submit your soul."

She sucked in a breath, a mixture of pleasure and pain, not from the relatively light hold he had of her silver-blue tresses but from the demand he was making. "I...I can't. They will kill me."

Tryla pricked her ears, trying to fight the growing waves of submissive desire. If only he didn't overpower her so with the proximity of his insolent, proud body, his mind-blowing scent. His harsh alien ways—mysterious discipline combined with mercy, a female treasured and controlled, dominated...and loved.

Did Vhrazhians love their mates?

This man would. Vharhin was not capable of mating without love, of this much she was certain. Tryla sensed emotion in him. She couldn't read it, only sense.

"No one will kill you, Ananke. I give you my pledge."

She had tears in her eyes. "You can't protect me from all of them. Please, let me serve you. You are a male, I am a female."

Vharhin released her. "You are not listening to me."

Ananke was shaking, broken.

Vharhin had succeeded in cracking her exterior but he was not going to get any farther without assistance.

"I...I want to serve," she sobbed. "That's all."

Tryla tapped Vharhin's thigh. "Perhaps I could be of assistance...Sir?"

He frowned but knew better than to argue. "Proceed," he said.

She suppressed a smile. In spite of everything, they were working together.

"Ananke," said Tryla, trying to get the woman to focus. "You have to let it out. You can't keep it bottled up inside. Trust us, we can help."

The next thing she knew Ananke was in her arms, shaking violently.

Chapter Eight

A short while later the three of them were arranged on a couch, made from two pod pillows. Ananke was wearing a short robe of silk, an antique garment with patterns of a Japanese design of bamboo trees on a mountainside under a wispy sky. Tryla was beside her, holding her hand, taking on yet another awkward role, that of comforter and female confidante.

Tryla had even less use for most females of her kind than she did for the males. The clinginess and emotionality they displayed was often too much to bear. She despised such displays in herself as well. The fact that she had just done what she had with Vharhin, in front of Ananke, was going to lead to some serious self-recriminations later.

She would take it out on the robo-ball court or maybe on some future partner, if Chief Sonyago should ever be so stupid as to try interfering with her solo ways again.

"Ananke, are you ready to tell us?" asked Vharhin, seated on her other side.

"I don't know where to begin." She wanted Vharhin to hold her other hand. He did so.

"Just start at the beginning," Tryla said, trying not to react to the contact or his lack of concern for her possible reaction to it. Why, after all this, should she feel possessive? Vharhin didn't want her, so why want him?

"You met the ambassador," Vharhin pressed. "That was how it started."

"Let her tell the story," said Tryla sharply. There had been quite enough male chest beating for one day, thank you very much.

Ananke sniffled, too wrapped up in her own anguish to notice the distinct change of roles between her interrogators. "No, the first one who came to me was Madame Duplessix. She had a man with her who called himself Mr. Facia."

Vharhin looked at Tryla. The same Facia who had hired the thugs to kill them.

"This Facia, what did he look like?"

Ananke shrank into herself slightly. It had taken Tryla a while to convince the woman to talk, holding and soothing her, letting her know she would be safe. If only Tryla could be as sure on that score as Vharhin seemed to be.

"He wore a mask, black with a white painted smile. It was a little spooky. He was tall and he had an artificially distorted voice. Stood very straight. I remember that."

Tryla's instincts said he was military or ex-military. This could not be going anywhere good.

"What did he and the Madame want?" asked Vharhin,

"They said they wanted to help me. They had an offer I couldn't refuse, a whole new list of clients—elite, very well-paying, regular and prompt, mostly fetish work, nice and easy."

"Sounds like a dream," said Tryla. "Don't tell me, in exchange you were to ask no questions, deny everything if you were ever asked?"

"Yes. They told me discretion was everything. I was to drop all my old clients and provide service only to them. They had another word too...patriotism."

Tryla tensed. Not good, not good at all.

"They told you that you would be serving your government?" Vharhin asked.

"Yes. The men they sent me were obviously important. They never came in uniform but it was pretty clear, the way they acted, the stuff they wanted from me. A couple were bureaucrats. I figured that out too. In my business, I know men."

"How did the ambassador enter the picture?" asked Vharhin.

"About two months into things, Mr. Facia returned with Madame Duplessix. They gave me a long speech about the good of the human race. They told me they were some kind of special agents, super-secret, and I was going to be doing this super-secret thing. That's when they explained about the Vhrazhian Ambassador coming to me. They told me how good and loyal I had been so far, how all the men gave good reports and now I would have to be better than good. I was a little afraid because he was an alien but they said he would never touch me, not physically at least."

Tryla and Vharhin exchanged a look.

"He meant another kind of touching?"

Her head lowered. She was obviously leery of proceeding. Vharhin lifted her chin with his hand, so gently it made Tryla gasp. Why had he never been that way with her?

"Ananke, we cannot help you if you do not tell us everything. You have nothing to be ashamed of and fear will do you no good. Whatever you did, you did so in good faith. I believe in the purity of your heart. Do you believe in the truth of my words?"

She nodded, wide-eyed, clearly in awe.

Tryla fought back the waves of emotion. How ironic that she was too strong to receive Vharhin's full male protective treatment. She had fought him so hard and here she was, envious of a pleasure worker, a woman whose very life was in danger and whose future was entirely in question.

"Then tell us, Ananke, tell us everything."

"They had a machine," said Ananke. "I had never seen anything like it. They said it was a new kind of blip machine, one that allowed a mind-to-mind link for receiving the same information but it was obvious it did more. It was something like facing too."

Tryla was certain this was some variation of the technology Sonyago had used to download the case information to them simultaneously. By the Ten Planets, was Sonyago in on this?

"They wanted me to use it with my clients, all of them. The ambassador included."

"And the men agreed?" asked Tryla.

"Yes. It turned out to be quite pleasant. The sex was fuller, richer somehow.

"Richer how?"

"I don't know." She struggled for words. "It was like we reached into each other's minds, shared experiences and went places each other had been. I think...I think those were some of the happiest encounters of my life."

"Sounds wonderful," soothed Tryla, well aware that what the young woman was unwittingly describing was a potential nightmare security breach. All those Erth big shots, along with the ambassador from the only other superpower in the known universe, trafficking the contents of their mind through a naïve, highly paid pleasure worker?

Credits and power and sex. The big three, always.

Tryla had a million questions. They were close to exhausting Ananke, however, in terms of both her knowledge and physical energy. There were just a few more things they needed to know and which only she could provide at the moment.

The larger matter, of the overall conspiracy, which there obviously was, would have to wait.

"Ananke," coaxed Tryla. "You must tell us what happened to the ambassador. You saw him more recently than you told us, didn't you?"

She nodded in the affirmative. "He was here," she said in a dead whisper. "The night before you came."

"You used the machine with him?"

"Yes. We did as we always did. He sat on one of these pillows—everything with all the men happened right here in this room, you see—while I sat across from him and combed my hair. We each had the tiny implant in our ear. The machine was kept over there in the corner. He was reaching into me, enjoying me, soothing me and I was feeling peaceful, as I always do with him. He empties me, you see...he takes away everything that builds up."

"What do you mean, 'builds up'?"

"All the images and thoughts from the others. I love them all, you see, but it gets to be too much. They are such important men, so weighed down and the ambassador always lets me be just his vessel, filled only for him. Can you imagine how that feels?"

Tryla averted her gaze from Vharhin. "Yes, I can imagine."

Actually she knew only too well how a Vhrazhian like Vharhin could reach in and make a woman feel. She could only imagine getting a full dose of the super-facing or whatever it was. Just that brief flash with Vharhin had been enough to blast open her heart and she had yet to put it back together.

The fact that he had followed up with her physically, mercilessly, only underscored just how dangerous this race could be.

"I didn't think anything different would happen," Ananke continued. "Usually, we go on for half an hour or so and then he pays me, kisses my hand and that is that. But that last time he vanished before he could do either. I wasn't even half done, only five hundred strokes of my usual routine of a thousand."

"He...vanished?"

"Yes," she said. "Though that isn't the strange part. It's the fact that he didn't even say goodbye."

"Men ordinarily vanish from your chamber?" asked Vharhin.

"The ones Mr. Facia sends, yes. He gave me another machine for it. The special clients simply appeared and disappeared. That machine and the blip machine are gone. Everything went with the ambassador."

Vharhin spoke to Tryla. "She must mean teleportation."

"The same way you got to Erth," said Tryla.

"Yes. Your side must be working on the same technology."

"No one saw the ambassador come and go," Tryla began to speculate aloud. "Because he was being beamed here and before that to Madame Duplessix's establishment."

"But he was seen that last night in a transport bubble near the Embassy," Vharhin reminded.

"Ananke," Tryla asked. "Did the ambassador appear in the normal way that night, using the machine?"

"No," she said, as if realizing the significance for the first time. "He came in through the back portal of the club, directly into my room. He said he was having trouble with the machine on his end."

"Tryla," said Vharhin. "I have no one on this world I can trust but you. Is there anywhere we can take Ananke for protection or will I be required to personally guard her?"

Ananke gripped his hand. "Don't leave me."

"I'll admit the list just got a lot shorter," said Tryla. "But I would trust Sonyago with my life—have in fact, more times than I can count."

Vharhin was momentarily skeptical. "You seemed to have concerns about the judgment of your chief when we first met."

"Only because of you. I didn't say the chief was perfect but he-she would never betray me or Erth."

He offered a slight smile, though on him it was a veritable grin. "I am glad you don't condemn Sonyago for occasional acts of poor judgment."

"You're not all bad," Tryla said grudgingly. "But don't hold your breath for any compliments."

"Thanks for the advice."

Ananke edged toward Vharhin. *Little wench*. "Can't I stay with you?"

"I am sorry." He stroked her cheek. "But it is imperative that Agent Tryla and I uncover this plot. If we cannot do so, there is no telling the danger for all of us."

"You're a great man," she said.

"He's not a man at all," Tryla said. "He's a Vhrazhian. And if you two wouldn't mind holding off on the lovey-dovey stuff, we need to get to Sonyago...fast."

Vharhin was smiling again.

"Whatever you are thinking, you can go to hell."

"You have no clue what's on my mind."

"Maybe not, but whatever it is, I know it would piss me off."

Ananke whispered something in Vharhin's ear. He pursed his lips, making no comment.

Tryla turned beet red.

Stupid female biology.

This was her fault for trying so hard to hate Vharhin. Hate was a strong thing, too easily flipped to its opposite.

From now on she would regard him as a necessary evil, small and unimportant in the scheme of things.

Like taxes and speed limits...and oxygen to breathe.

* * * * *

It was official. Vharhin had just experienced the Vhrazhian male's paradise—the female of his dreams on her knees before him, pledging her obedience.

Unfortunately the female was an Erthwoman and she was merely playing a part for the sake of an investigation. The fact that his cock had been so thoroughly fooled into erection at the kiss of her soft lips in the presence of yet another female only spoke to the ignorance of biology and the need for the higher mind to rule.

Tryla was lovely and passionate and with every passing hour his admiration for her only grew. But she could never be his. It was the law, it was tradition. A Shahar Shodan did not think for himself. He thought for his people. Besides, what Vhrazhian did think on his own? They were a race, branches on the living tree, the stubborn corded twines of the rock-fountain, ach-minei, dependent upon roots broken into desert soil and upon the blistering sun and the wash of the rains but once every hundred years.

From such brutal environs, his people had built oases beyond compare and they would continue to thrive so long as they understood that there was no gift without thorns, no sun without heat blisters...no life without commitment.

What was Tryla feeling? What was in her heart? A Vhrazhian man should not have to worry so, should never have to wonder. His mate was provided for, she was consistent, predictable.

Contained better and more solidly than Ananke in her dancing tube, though with infinitely more possibilities.

Vhrazhian women were free, no matter what Tryla said.

If he believed this though, if he was orthodox now to his people's ways as when he'd beamed here in the first place, then why was he even speaking thusly in his head?

No speech comes except in answer and no answer exists unless there is a question. She was the biggest question of his life. She was the very essence of instability, lack of equilibrium and at this moment he was not sure how he would ever live without her.

"I blipped Sonyago," she announced as Ananke continued to fuss with her clothing and accessories. "We are going to meet them in one of the green areas, completely secluded from spy bots. I told them just enough to make their hair stand on end."

"I assume you checked this room for bugs already?"

"When we arrived, while you were flirting with Little Missy over there."

"Vhrazhians don't flirt. They take what they want."

"You didn't take her when she offered."

Ananke was out of earshot at the moment, under a makeup bubble.

"Which tells you I didn't want her."

"It tells me you're unpredictable, dangerous. Not to be trusted."

"Seems to me I'm learning how to be an ErthSec agent."

"Which only proves my point."

"But we have to trust each other, don't we, until we know what's going on and who is involved."

"Secrets are being traded," said Tryla, echoing his own thoughts. "Ananke was put in business to be the ultimate sex spy. Men on both sides were sent to her with lots of juicy secrets. It's a sure bet that little linking machine was downloading everything somewhere."

"You said you thought the sahvria had a connection to the ambassador, that he was sharing his experiences with her."

"What would she do with them? Aren't your women supposed to be isolated and helpless?"

His lips angled sharply. "You have given me reason to rethink a good deal, Erthwoman."

She raised a brow. "I think that's the most shocking admission I have heard in this case and that's going some."

"I will not repeat it."

"I am sure you won't. Something else occurs to me. You recall I wondered about some of the images the sahvria painted and whether the ambassador could have been to those places?"

"Yes," said Vharhin, recalling her words, fascinating and precious, like everything else that came from her lush and passionate lips. "You thought she might be in contact with another."

"Ananke spoke of sharing experiences with her clients. What if all of it went to her—from all the Erth brass and her husband too?" Tryla's eyes were glistening. She was deep in thought. He wanted to sweep her into his arms, to pledge the strength of his heart and arms to her forever, backing and defending her.

"There's something else," she said, her face lit with an energy she possessed only when she was engaged in her work.

"Yes?" Vharhin wished she had such a glow for him.

"She spoke of another man, the ambassador's brother. She said he would...inherit her."

Vharhin's system went on high alert. Vhrazhians were never surprised. Their responses were more practical and ancient and in this case, martial.

"What?" She picked up on his body language. "Is that important?"

"It could be. The ambassador's brother is Lord Fhirvhi, the Minister of State."

"Nazhlan's boss, you said. The one he was going to call."

"That's right. I do not suspect Nazhlan of anything. I believe he is too narrow-mindedly centered on his duty. But Lord Fhirvhi is not a strong supporter of the Shodan, nor did he endorse wholeheartedly the peace process. Our political system is complex. The weight of power goes to the Shodan but everything is a balance. The Ministry of State has a definite position all its own."

"You think he and his brother, the ambassador, conspired to collect information from Erth generals? To put Vhrazhia in a position to restart the war with advantage?"

Vharhin followed the reasoning, allowing his brain free rein to travel whatever direction might be required. "Such behavior would be treasonous, very rare in my world but it has a logic to it, if Lord Fhirvhi believed he was acting in Vhrazhia's true interests."

"There are holes in this, though. Why use the ambassador at all? Why not just collect the information through that machine? And who is this Facia character? Why would he hand-feed your side, lining up our people like so many dominoes?"

"Evidence points toward Facia being some kind of Erth agent. Could that be true?" he asked.

"It would have to be a rogue element of ErthSec or maybe ErthDef. The military has its intelligence units, most of which are notorious for non-cooperation. They are certainly fanatics and a lot of them are plenty pissed we stopped fighting your people. But there isn't any way any of them would sell us out."

"What if someone's playing both sides against the middle?"

"I would suspect the Harn but in any given swarm there is barely enough brainpower to operate a door switch, much less pull off the interplanetary conspiracy of the millennium," she quipped.

"We must also figure out how the ambassador's disappearance fits into all this."

"There are a lot of questions I have for Sonyago. I want to know exactly who they are talking to in ErthGov and what's being said."

Vharhin felt a swelling in the middle of his chest. For a Vhrazhian, it was a sign of needing to make an admission. "Tryla?"

"What is it?"

"Certain of the things I have said to you so far, they were...ill-advised."

She shook her head. "On Erth we call that venting. It's not a big deal."

"On Vhrazhia it is," he countered. "A man's words adorn him, for good or ill."

"You look fine, clothed or unclothed."

He let it go at that.

Strange that she should be more unsentimental than him. Females were supposed to be the keepers of feelings, the holders of a man's sensitivities and not the other way around. But Tryla did not follow expectations, human or Vhrazhian.

She was unique.

And that was a good thing.

Chapter Nine

Tryla knew something was wrong the moment they reached the Green Zone. The birds were too still, the small robo squirrels had fled and even the leaves seemed to be holding something back.

Someone or something was nearby...and it was not Sonyago.

She drew her weapon as they approached the sloping half shell of viridium crystal beneath which picnickers and lovers could seek shelter from the artificially generated, randomly programmed rain showers that spurted from the concealed piping in the zone's outer framework.

Vharhin took note, if for no other reason than because it was the first time she had ever held the pistol, in his presence, without aiming it at him.

Vharhin needed no explanation. Taking Ananke's arm, he steered her across the pseudo-grass pathway and behind a nearby tree, a genuine half-size replica of a redwood from Old California. The movement was a bit halting, given Ananke's impractical choice of stiletto-heeled silver boots and a skintight brush-on miniskirt.

A moment later he returned to Tryla, having stashed Ananke inside the hollow of the tree itself. Should she need help he could be back there in a flash.

That's how it went when you were a damsel in distress and not a self-sufficient tomboy agent. The tomboys never did get the heartthrobs, did they?

She did have Vharhin at her side right now, though, his eagle eyes carefully scanning the pathway. She felt safer by about tenfold, though logically she knew she really was just fine on her own, armed and trained in two dozens types of martial arts to boot.

Tryla inclined her head, indicating they should split up.

He nodded, taking up the right flank.

They reached the two sides of the dome simultaneously. In smooth precision, her aiming the pistol and him wielding a type of hand disk common among Vhrazhian warriors, they drew a bead on the rows of high-backed chairs around the tables.

The place was empty, another unusual occurrence.

She felt a sickening pull in her gut as she saw one overturned table. She didn't need to look to see what was behind it.

A wave of rage and heart-splitting helplessness overtook her as she beheld the sight of Chief Sonyago prone on the ground, his head crushed under the weight of a heavy stone.

"No!" she cried. "Sonyago, no!"

Vharhin took her into his arms. She didn't fight him. She was too tired. He held on to her as the screams gave way to sobs. She buried her head against his powerful alien chest, the tears staining his uniform.

"No, no, no..." The sound trailed off to a broken whisper.

"Tryla, sweetheart," he murmured. "It's all right."

It wasn't all right, it was as far from all right as anything could be but he was calling her by another name, a term of endearment and at this moment, she did not hate it.

More tears followed, ones she must have been storing for quite some time. He stroked her hair and continued to tell her things would be fine. A woman could start to believe that after a while.

She broke the embrace first. It felt too good and if she didn't she might not want to ever and this wasn't the time for any other things to happen—for kisses and confessions and promises.

"Vharhin, what do we do now?"

She had never been so naked, so vulnerable to a man. He could tell her to jump off the top of the dome into oblivion and she would do it.

His expression was full of resolve, as though he drew strength from her need for him, a sense of purpose. "We protect Ananke," he said. "We protect each other."

Tryla didn't feel capable of protecting a fly. "My gun," she said. "I dropped it."

He had it tucked into his belt. He'd had the presence of mind to retrieve it.

"Sonyago was the only one I ever cared about."

"There are few people in life worth caring about," he said. "On your planet or mine."

"I don't even know who I am. I have no memories before the Academy, Vharhin."

"You are a creature of duty," he said. "As am I. Our memories belong to the past. We sacrificed them to be what we are."

"We can't be alike," she said. "You must have a million memories. Fireworks and gel candies on Federation Day or whatever you celebrate, cozy nights on the couch with the emperor and empress and all your little royal cousins and brothers and sisters?"

She didn't mean it to sound bitter or sarcastic but she really didn't have any other way of talking.

He didn't seem offended. "The royal life isn't all it's cracked up to be," he said. "At least not on Vhrazhia. As for siblings, I am an only child."

"Cry me a river," she said as she reached for her pistol, briefly touching his hard stomach as she did. The contact was energy-zapping for both of them.

"Oh...Vharhin." Her hand recoiled. "I wish..."

He took her fingers and put them back, allowing her to feel his sculpted muscles. "Just let it be. Let this moment be."

Her hands slid up his chest, her palms feeling the contours of his pectorals. This might be her last chance, she must memorize him for a lifetime. "I have never wanted anyone this bad," she confessed. "My resistance is shot. I hate you for it and I know you hate me."

"I could never hate you, Tryla." He touched her cheek.

"Don't." She turned her head.

"Why not?"

"Because..."

"That's not a reason." He compelled her to look him in the eye.

"Don't push it," she warned, though she lacked conviction.

"I asked you a question." He held her cheeks between his thumb and forefinger.

"Because," she blurted. "I hate that you touched her. I hate that you will touch another."

"You think it won't be you I see each and every time?"

Her eyes moistened all over again. "You're cruel, Vharhin. You're cruel as any Vhrazhian has ever been."

Something in him was touched, something was coming to the surface.

"My people did not start the war," he said, his voice fierce. "We were attacked. Erthers slaughtered an entire Vhrazhian colony because they would not submit to alien ways."

"We...we were liberators," she whispered, parroting what she had always been taught from the Academy textbooks and from the talk at every pub and on every street corner under the dome. "Your females...came running to us for hope..."

"Because their homes were on fire, Tryla. Their males dead or dying."

She broke free of his embrace. "I won't hear this. I won't lose Sonyago and be told my whole world is a lie. Not in one day."

"Where are you going?"

"What do you care," she called over her shoulder. "I'm the oppressor, right?"

"But what about the case? Ananke?"

"You solve it. And keep the girl. She's more your speed. She'll do penance for the human race. Keep her on her knees the rest of her life. I'm sure she will enjoy it."

Tryla knew that was stupid, maybe suicidal. There was nowhere to run, no hope outside Vharhin. But at this moment she really didn't care. She was tired—tired of fighting, tired of being.

Vharhin had committed the most horrible offense. Tryla had just suffered the worst tragedy imaginable for her and he had felt the need to compound it with a lesson in Vhrazhian propaganda. So the Erthers had fired the first shot, at least from a certain

point of view. There was more than enough much pride and blood and ignorance to go around.

Who had asked the Vhrazhians to fire ten shots in reply for each of the original ones? Was there some special place in eternity reserved for the officers of the Vhrazhian fleet who had decimated Erth Colony 56 in retaliation—ten thousand souls, men, women and children?

What was wrong with him to forget the lessons of the struggle? Why lash out at the only human being to ever show him kindness? Granted, he had met few but he did not think anyone else would reach out as she had.

Vharhin ran to catch up with her, his longer strides quickly overtaking her. "Tryla, wait..."

"Get your filthy alien hands off me!"

He held his ground as she lashed out. He had her arms pinned to her sides but she managed to deliver a kick between his legs. Were he a human male he would be on the ground screaming.

"That's supposed to hurt, you damn freak!"

"Vhrazhian...physiology..." he breathed.

She swore up a storm. "I swear to the stars, I will find a way to kill you!"

"I already showed you how—a beam to the heart."

"Just leave me alone," she said, furious and red-faced.

"I can't do that, Tryla...not until you hear my apology. I was wrong to say what I did. The war cannot be laid at the feet of your race. Each side must accept its guilt and we have enough for eons of soul-searching."

"Fine." She squirmed. "I heard it, now let me go."

He spun her about and held her back to front. "I can't do that, Tryla. You are under my protection."

"The hell I am." Her motions against his crotch were having an undesired effect, given the gravity of the situation.

"As the male," he said, as levelheadedly as possible. "I must endeavor to protect you."

"Bullshit, Vharhin, I can feel your hard-on!"

"It is the friction caused by your struggling."

"Then release me."

"Stop struggling first."

"I don't trust you."

"And I should trust you?"

"Yes."

Vharhin released her. She started running again. He did a tackle that was appropriate to her smaller size. She was on her back, panting. He had her wrists over her head.

"Well, go on," she hissed, hot-eyed. "Have your way with me again. I'm obviously your favorite new toy."

"This isn't about sex," he lied. "This is about our mission and for once you are going to listen to me."

"Or else?"

"Or else this..." Vharhin kissed her—hard and punishing. He flattened her lips and thrust his tongue deep inside her mouth. He hadn't realized how much sexual tension had built in such a short time. Was he ever going to get enough of this female?

By the time he released her, she was subdued, at least for the moment. Her back was slightly arched, her body relaxed. He knew it was a fine line, either make love to her now or watch the clock tick down to the reigniting of her anger.

Lovemaking was not an option.

"While I have your attention, we will cover the rules."

She licked her lips, her expression vague.

"You will be in my sight at all times. You will obey safety instructions. And you will refrain from arousing me."

That last one seemed foolish, even to his own ears. Naturally she questioned him.

"What am I doing?"

"That lip-licking thing for starters. And you smile too seductively and when you are thinking, your eyes light up too much."

"Is that all?" She had a barely contained smirk.

"Yes," he said, determined to pursue his folly to its conclusion. "No more swaying your hips when you walk. And your hair, by the sun's light, stop binding your hair."

"What is wrong with binding my hair?"

"It is provocative and unseemly." He shifted, trying to keep his erection at bay. "A female's hair is kept loose, as a symbol of her softness and openness to the male. Men bind their hair as a sign of strength, of their responsibilities in the world."

"How about breathing? Do I do that right?"

"You could try to regulate it, yes. Too fast, too slow—must I be constantly reminded of the beauty of your breasts?"

"I see. So other than my lips, my smile, my eyes and hair and hips and breasts and breathing, I'm good with you?"

Vharhin frowned. She had managed to make him look ridiculous. Again.

"What? Have I offended you in some new way?" she asked coyly.

"You know what I'm talking about," he dismissed. "We are colleagues and that is that."

"Maybe if you weren't constantly kissing and grabbing at me."

He had to admit, looking back, he had not shown a good deal of restraint. "I will change my behavior too."

"You do that." She pointedly lifted her pelvis.

"Drawing constant attention to my erections is not helping."

It was Ananke who put an end to their latest round of squabbling, pseudo-sex.

"For stars' sake," she snarled. "If you two could keep your hands off each other long enough, I would kind of like to stay alive."

Vharhin rose to his feet. Reluctantly, Tryla accepted a hand up to a standing position beside Ananke.

Ananke had her hip thrust out and her arms folded. "You two are pathetic. Do you know how many times I could have been killed by now?"

"I had the situation covered," said Vharhin.

"No, you had *her* covered. I would tell you to get a sex chamber but I would be stuck watching."

Tryla cleared her throat, discreetly suppressing laughter.

"Just so you females understand...I am in charge," Vharhin declared.

Ananke raised her brow at Tryla who rolled her eyes.

"I am very serious."

"Yes, we know." Tryla was smirking, openly.

Vharhin feigned annoyance but his heart soared because Tryla was content again...at least for the moment.

To keep her that way, he would give anything.

He hoped that would spur him to nobility and heroism. But there was a danger, as in anything that, when a male's motives no longer reflected that of his group, he might stray into irrationality, recklessness or in the case of the conspirators, into treason itself.

There was no man he could trust.

Himself least of all.

"We should call this in," he said. "Anonymously. We don't know who did this. They could be after us too."

"What did you say?" Tryla's eyes were narrowed, she was thinking...in nonlinear fashion.

"I said we should call this in," he repeated, seeing his tenuous hold on the leadership position slipping. "Anonymously—"

"Because we don't know who to trust," she completed the thought. "Remember, you asked before who I could trust? There is another. And he might be able to help all of us, even Sonyago."

Vharhin pursed his lips. "Who is he, some kind of miracle worker?"

"No," said Tryla, eyes twinkling. "Just a disaffected and mildly unstable robotics genius."

"Unstable," he grumbled. "Just what we need."

"Enough complaining." She pressed her hands, palms flat against his back. "We need to get out of here...and Sonyago is coming with us."

Vharhin didn't ask questions. He was learning.

* * * * *

Tryla was a whirl of self-contradictory, mind-blowing emotion. Her heart had just been crushed and yet she had a set of wings, freshly sprouted. She couldn't use them well but they were keeping her from plunging into the abyss.

The credit belonged to Vharhin.

If she had lost Sonyago on any other day, at any other time, with any other male in her company, she doubted she would have been able to go on.

She wasn't proud of that fact. She should have been stronger all on her own. She owed Sonyago that and ErthSec too. From what she understood, she had been unhappy and unproductive when Sonyago had recruited her for the elite ErthSec force. Apparently the then-Sub Chief had done one hell of a job convincing her or else Tryla had had one really terrible life beforehand, because the next thing she knew she was waking clean in an Academy orientation office, the signed electronic documents in front of her, authorizing the brain drains to complete a memsweep.

"Be careful," Tryla instructed as they loaded Sonyago's remains into the back of the air car. "You're dealing with true heroes here."

Vharhin was careful to the point of reverence, settling the broken android into place. Tryla was on the verge of tears all over again as he covered over the shattered pieces of brain and body with the storage tarp.

There had to be a way to bring Sonya and Yago back. If anyone could do it, it was Jonny G Pak, the quirky, thin as a wire cyber-scientist with the oversized goggles and the overgrown head of turquoise hair.

Sonyago was just too important to her and to the world. They had been with her through everything, right from the first day of training, encouraging her every time she wanted to quit, which was constantly. Scared and alone, she had nowhere else to turn. The male and female sides took turns, encouraging, comforting, chiding. Tryla, suspicious of any show of affection, had asked why they were doing that.

"Because," they had said, in a rare moment of complete agreement. "You are going to be the best."

Tryla could understand a motive of enlightened self-interest and she learned to trust it. Somehow she had made it through the Academy and in the end had been top of her class. She was to be assigned directly to Sonyago, who was about to be made chief.

In typically inexplicable and sadistic agency fashion, Tryla had been required to sign a waiver first, allowing ErthSec to keep her memories from her. In preparation she'd had to sit for a standard review of the unloaded data in transcript form.

It was an intensely bizarre sensation, reading one's own life like it was someone else's, just some random blip belonging to a stranger. Sparse as the description had been, she had managed to memorize the wording.

Subject born on Erth Colony Beta 675. Youngest of three children, happy, well-adjusted little girl. Eldest brother Garad served in the ErthDef Marines, three tours, decorated at the siege of Black Ridge, Seti Nine Sub Battle and was killed there. Second brother Mored killed, Vhrazhian attack, standard year of the war eighty-one. Father Gilidian and Uncle Vorsin also killed. Probable cause, standard Vhrazhian heat beams, concentration one to the twelfth power. Subject spared, sequestered in subterranean protection chamber along with other colony children. Detained by enemy for three months, exchanged for enemy noncombatant equivalents. Reared on Erth Colony Beta 675, unremarkable record... Subject withdrawn...latent antisocial tendencies. Recruited age twenty by ErthSec, personal endorsement, Sub Chief and later Chief Sonyago.

Had she loved anyone before that? Had she broken any hearts? What had her father's aftershave smelled like? Had she played games with her brothers? What had it been like cowering in a bomb shelter while the Vhrazhian fighters attacked? Had school been very boring for her? What were her friend's names? Any pets?

She hadn't been a virgin — that much had been physically verifiable.

If she'd wanted to, she could have resigned her commission after the reading and taken back her life. Instead she had signed the waiver. In record time.

From that point on, her personal experiences, sexual and non-sexual alike went into a box, a compartment in her mind. They were sacrificial, optional, easily dispensed with. Why be attached to something she knew firsthand could be so easily taken away?

Who knew what the future might hold. What if she were recruited for a new agency or some higher level at ErthSec that required her to negate everything that had come before?

Personal attachments were useless, commitment was everything.

This is what made Vharhin so perplexing, exciting...consuming. His memory was alive, he kept eating deeper, seeping into everything, adding color, making things three-dimensional.

Her feelings, and she did have them, made her think of commitment...to him. Not that he would ever give the same in return.

"I will drive," said Vharhin when it came time to climb into the air car.

Tryla hesitated. She always drove.

"No arguments," he insisted. "You have just been through a trauma. You will ride sharp gun."

"That's shotgun," she corrected, getting in the passenger side.

"The principle is the same."

"Language is precise," she argued. "One word isn't the same as another."

Ananke grumbled from the backseat. "You two deserve each other."

She had said it in jest but it got Tryla thinking. If in fact they did deserve each other, would that be considered a mutual reward or punishment?

Chapter Ten

Tryla's friend lived in an unsavory-looking district. The towers were at ground level, made of exposed hyper-steel girders and plasticrete chunks. The windows were slits, dirty and faded. Long rows of these buildings lined the narrow streets. There were defunct air cars and other vehicles at regular intervals, half on the roadway and half on the people-mover belts, all of which were broken.

Lean, suspicious faces watched them from openings between the structures. Vharhin did not like the look of it one bit. Nor was he hopeful about the person they might find waiting. What sort of world-class scientist lived in such an area?

"Jonny lives over there," she pointed. "See by the parking garage? You can fly right inside. He's up on the hundredth floor."

"You've got to be kidding," said Ananke. "What is this guy, some kind of dome rat?"

"He's eccentric," said Tryla.

Vharhin pulled back his lips into a line of displeasure. "Eccentric is one thing, Tryla, but this is pure foolishness. This area can hardly be safe."

"You've been on Erth for two days, Vharhin," she challenged crossly. "How would you possibly know what's safe or not?"

"I know," volunteered Ananke.

"No one asked you," said Tryla.

"Tryla..." Vharhin's tone was stern, warning.

She met him with a fiery glance, a brief test of wills.

Vharhin won.

"I'm sorry, Ananke," said Tryla, correcting her rudeness. Her voice was brittle, indicating that she was under duress but the sentiment was real enough.

Vharhin's cock swelled in response to her act of deference. "I will expect you to be more considerate in the future."

Tryla's newfound politeness did not extend to him. "Screw you, Vharhin."

Ananke snickered.

Vharhin let the matter drop. He would deal with Tryla's impudence later. Pulling the air car inside the garage he followed her instructions to park in the rear next to a dented, graffiti-covered waste container, the size of a transport bubble. The garage itself was enormous, poorly lit, with long shadows cast over the wrecked vehicles and random piles of scrap material. Clearly this place was not being used on a daily basis, at least not by honest citizens.

"Jonny's place is behind that door." Tryla pointed to a rectangular portal made of thick, ribbed metal. The wall was made of some kind of plasticrete.

There were burn scars along it, from some kind of laser weapon.

Tryla was opening her door, ready to get out.

"No," said Vharhin, overcome with a fierce protective urge. "I will check the situation out first to determine if it is safe for you."

"Sorry to disappoint you, *Your Highness*," she snarled. "But I'm not sitting in here twiddling my thumbs while you pretend to be a big shot cop."

Vharhin took hold of her arm. He had only one option left.

He had spotted the light cuffs under the dashboard earlier.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she demanded as he connected their wrists with the stronger-than-steel interlocking energy bands.

"Making sure you behave," he replied.

She dove for the deactivator rod which was still under the console. He anticipated her move and wrapped his arm about her, pinning her other arm at her waist.

"Let go of me, you vooz bastard!"

"I will when you agree to be reasonable." He tried to keep her at bay. The way she was squirming against him was making his cock hard. Again.

Unfortunately, she took notice. "What's reasonable about that rocket in your pocket, smart guy?"

"If you would sit still..." He tried to pass the blame. "Or are you enjoying yourself?"

"Um, I think I'll wait outside," said Ananke, taking her cue.

"We can do this all day," said Vharhin, hugging her more tightly. In truth he could not keep this up long. Not without needing to be closer, on her, in her, no clothes, nothing at all to separate them – not their jobs, not their respective planets.

"All right," she cried. "Enough."

"You will behave? No more foolish rebellions?"

"Don't push it." Her voice indicated how easily she could return to wildcat mode.

He let her up. Her hair was tousled, her eyes were wild. He wanted her more than he had ever wanted a woman in his life.

"Stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?" He smiled.

"Like you're enjoying having me bound to you."

"Perhaps I am."

The emotions flew across her eyes. Her lips twitched – sexy, pouting.

He saw the slap coming a mile away. Vharhin captured her wrist in midair. His heart pounded as he held her in his grip, helpless.

"That was the action of a female, Tryla. A defeated one."

"You have not beaten me. I haven't even started to fight."

Vharhin's need to command her, to overpower her, was irresistible. He needed to bind them, here and now, in some small way, as male and female, dominant and submissive. "Close your eyes, Tryla," he whispered. "Part your lips." Her breathing was shallow. She had no leverage to fight, physically or emotionally. "Do it," he murmured. "Obey."

Tryla's beautiful lashes slid shut. Slowly, very slowly, her mouth opened to him. He did not kiss her but took her lower lip between his teeth, biting, softly chewing. She moaned and squirmed, not injured but possessed.

"I hope this lesson is clear," he said.

Her eyes were glassy. A part of her was drawing itself in, wanting to retreat. There was nowhere to go. She was attached by the circle of confining energy, a circle linked to another which equally confined him. He helped her out the door on his side.

"I can do it myself," she insisted, though clearly she could not.

"You two are a trip," said Ananke.

"Not another step," called a voice, booming off the distant walls.

Vharhin instinctively pulled Tryla close.

"It's Jonny," said Tryla, trying to squirm free. "He won't hurt us."

A small robot came out from behind the waste container. He was about a meter tall, silver, with a blaster rifle in each hand.

"Put your arms in the air," it said.

Vharhin could not make the transition to prisoner. "No," he called out. "We surrender to no one."

The voice laughed.

A man emerged from the shadows behind a large pylon. He was thin. He wore a hooded black cloak and black boots. He pulled the hood back some, revealing a narrow, bearded face and intense brown eyes.

"Long time no see, Tryla. Who's your prisoner?"

"He's not," she said reluctantly. "He's...my partner."

Jonny reared back his head and roared with laughter. "That figures. So who's on the boss end of those handcuffs?" he wanted to know.

"It is a stalemate for now," she said icily. "Jonny, meet Vharhin and Ananke."

Jonny G Pak was interested only in Ananke. Bowing low, his partially robotic body parts whirring, he took her hand in his own gloved one and kissed it. "Charmed, I'm sure. So tell me, where have you been all my lives?"

"Lives?" asked Ananke. "How many have you had?"

"If you mean actual existences, apart from tinkering with toys and other egghead activities?" quipped Tryla. "That would be none."

"That's not very nice, Tryla." He grinned, gold teeth flashing from behind the hood. "True but not nice. Actually, I lost count," he said. "And seeing as how I don't want to cash in on another one today, how about we get out of this ambush zone?"

Tryla stretched Vharhin's arm out so she could give Jonny a hug. Vharhin felt a tug of jealousy, however irrational, given that the two appeared only to be friends.

He just was not thinking clearly where Tryla was concerned. Was he making the right decisions, taking command of her comings and goings...on a planet he barely knew? Was this about his mission or his desires?

"Jonny, you are a serious sight for sore eyes." She sighed. "We have trouble, big time."

"Trouble's my middle name." He gave Ananke a wink. "Actually it's Romeo, in case you're curious."

"Too bad mine isn't Juliet," she retorted.

"A rose by any other name," he kept the Shakespeare theme going. "Would smell as sweet."

"Okay," Ananke said to Tryla. "Him I like."

"So what's going on?" asked Jonny.

Tryla laid it all out for him, from the beginning. He nodded here and there, adding a few "hmm"s and "wow"s for effect.

"Can you do anything for Sonyago?" she asked finally. "Please tell me there is hope."

"There's always hope." Pulling a small device from his pocket, he pushed several buttons.

More of the small robots began to emerge. They clanked and whirred out of the shadows—a small army of them.

"They will take Sonyago to my lab," he explained. "It will take some time."

Vharhin noted the way Ananke was eyeing Jonny. The interest seemed mutual. "Jonny, would Ananke be safe with you here, while Tryla and I return to the investigation? I don't want to give you more than you can handle. I would be less than truthful if I said there weren't some potentially very big players after us."

"Gov types?" Jonny looked intrigued.

"This might go all the way to the top," confirmed Tryla.

"Good. I'm an outlaw by trade," he said. "As for keeping her safe, the damsel has my full protection and that of my realm." He gave a sweeping bow. "Milady, all this wouldst be yours."

"Oo," she cooed playfully. "A burnt-out building and an army of mini-droids? Say it isn't so."

"Wait until you see the underground bunker and my endless supply of military-ration soy steaks and jelly chips."

She laughed, linking her arm with his.

"Seriously," said Jonny. "No one gets in here if I don't want them to. No one."

Vharhin turned to Ananke. "It is only fair that you have a say in this."

"Oh, so *she* gets a say," muttered Tryla.

Vharhin suppressed a smile. Tryla was adorable when angry. How she would huff and puff when put in mating bonds...and how she would scream her surrender to her lord.

"I think Jonny can take care of me," Ananke decided, giving him a long look. "That is if he's up for the task."

"I was born for it, Milady," he said.

Vharhin wondered if it was possible for humans to find a mate at first sight. A Vhrazhian's mate was chosen for him, by family, by community. It was wrong for a man to want for himself, especially a prince.

The robots had taken Sonyago from the air car. Jonny was squatting down, making an initial assessment.

"Jonny," said Tryla. "What are Sonyago's chances...honestly?"

"His body isn't the problem. Obviously that can be fixed. Worse comes to worst, you just dump the electrobrain into a new body. But we've got cerebral damage here." He rose to his feet. "There is one chance. You didn't hear this from me but there are backups stored for ErthSec agents."

"Backups?" asked Vharhin.

"Yes. Periodically their experiences are duplicated and stored in the membank. For occasions just like this."

"I had no idea," said Tryla.

"It's super top secret. Only the Council knows...and a few privileged hackers like myself."

"So you think you can hack into the data, get Sonyago's backup engrams?"

"It's theoretically possible. We could get all of him back, up to the last download. That would be a month ago, maybe two."

"You're a genius, Jonny." She moved to give him another hug.

Vharhin held fast, refusing to give her enough slack to reach him.

Jonny cleared his throat. "Well, Tryla, I can see you've met your match."

She was red-faced, eyes burning holes into Vharhin's. *I'll deal with you later*, the look said.

"We must be going," said Vharhin.

Ananke gave Vharhin and Tryla a hug. "You kids be safe."

"You too," said Tryla.

Vharhin attempted to smooth things over when they were back in the air car. "It seems to me we should return to Madame Duplessix, now that we understand her further role in things. Do you concur?"

Tryla was pouting. "Why should I tell you my opinion? So you can manhandle me, put me in bondage for having a mind of my own?"

"Everything I do with you is for your safety," he answered curtly.

"Bullshit, Vharhin. It was a cheap sexual thrill for you and you know it. That cock of yours damn near burned a hole in your pants when you put me in the light cuffs."

Vharhin frowned. "And you weren't the least bit aroused, woman?"

She pressed her lips, full and pouty and so completely kissable. "You started it."

"That's a mature answer." By the Empire, was he giving in to Erth sarcasm, Tryla's sarcasm?

"My body isn't your personal playground," she snapped back. "And I would appreciate you keeping your hands off it."

If only he could...

"Stop inciting me, then."

"If I want to incite you, you will know it!" she declared.

Vharhin had no doubt of that. The only question was how would he survive such an onslaught? "We are going to visit Madame Duplessix," he declared. "We will resume working as a team, focusing on the case."

She held up her wrist. "I'm cuffed, Sherlock. Not very inspirational in the teamwork department."

His heart thundered in his chest. "I will release you when I am assured that you are going to act in a rational manner."

"You mean when I obey you like a mindless little Vhrazhian wife."

"You are neither Vhrazhian nor are you my wife."

"Thank the stars," she muttered.

They flew in silence. After a while Vharhin handed her the deactivator rod to the light cuffs. She released her hand. He felt oddly alone.

"Okay." She fell immediately into her investigator's role. "So here is what we know, summing up. Madame Duplessix and this Mr. Facia character provided Ananke with high-level clients and a facing machine to link up. They also made sure the men could teleport in and out of her quarters. Meanwhile, the ambassador was also sent to her by Duplessix. And through the ambassador was some kind of link to his mate. It's like this web, isn't it? With Ananke as the spider, only she didn't have a clue who was being snared and why."

Vharhin knew what a spider was. They had similar creatures in the Vhrazhian desert, though they often grew to the size of an air car. "The real spiders are at the edge of the web," he speculated. "They are Vhrazhian or Erth-born, maybe both."

Tryla was impressed. "Good for you, that was some nonlinear thinking right there."

He smiled to himself, amazed and delighted as always at the rapid-fire shift in her emotions. She was so incredibly free, so unself-conscious. "Am I to assume you no longer hate me?"

"Oh, I still do," she said. "Just not at the moment."

"If information is being filtered both ways." Vharhin continued to follow his thoughts. "Then we can assume the goal here is not just to start the war back up again. This is about the balance of power. But which way is it being tipped?"

"We have to find the ambassador. Now more than ever."

"Yes," he agreed. "We must."

They were close at that moment. Like two companions on the road. Like two warriors headed to battle. It was a bond he should not feel with a being outside his race and certainly not one of the opposite gender.

It was dangerous. But he did not want it to end.

Tryla was giddy. Her mind was racing, she loved thinking in tandem with Vharhin, bouncing back and forth with a mind essentially alien but oddly familiar, like a piece of herself long lost.

They had a connection.

Of course Vharhin had some funny notions of connection which included him trying to dominate her.

Vharhin had claimed to be doing it out of protection. The notion was ridiculous but a part of her secretly reveled that a man would want to take care of her, that he would lay down rules and enforce them.

He would give his life for her, of that she had no doubt.

That was something she did not understand. She had worked with plenty of agents willing to die and kill and back her up but they did so for the principle of the agency, not for her personally. And she had felt the same about them.

Vharhin was anything but abstract. He was here, he was troublesome and very, very present in her moment.

Troublesome? Yes but honestly, there was no one else she would rather have by her side.

Not that she would let him know that or stop fighting him at every available opportunity.

They agreed to enter through the rear of Madame Duplessix's establishment, not through the green door in the silver wall up front.

There was no telling if they would surprise anyone. The more they looked at this case, the more it felt like eyes were watching them, managing to stay one step ahead.

More prudent agents might retreat, gather their forces. But Tryla was not that kind of person and neither, apparently, was Vharhin.

Vharhin insisted on going in the back door first. Tryla did not fight him. It was an odd feeling to be shielded by a larger, stronger body in front of hers. If she did not sense his innate respect for her, this would not be possible.

As it was, strange emotions surfaced. Running her conscious mind around the edge of her unconscious like a tongue, she could sense the boundaries of the empty hole where her childhood was—the naked roots, the core emotions of warmth and love for her family—and the subsequent ripping away.

Tryla shook it off. She couldn't go there, not now.

Not ever.

Vharhin motioned to the right, indicating he wished to make a turn at the end of the corridor. Machinery hummed in the background—the climate control and the trash disposal. The ceiling was low, the walls were close. The whole place gave her the creeps. Nothing on the walls, no doors, no windows.

Tryla had her pistol at the ready.

The ambassador is here, she thought. I can feel him.

But how?

Through the sahvria, perhaps?

Something occurred to her now. It was basic and elementary. She should have seen it before. If she had been able to sense the sahvria's thoughts all this time, what if the opposite were true?

What if they had been spied on all along?

In that case, they would know everything.

Including Vharhin's real identity.

There was no time to consider further or to warn Vharhin. The corridor lit up in front and back. He pulled her close. Pink smoke rolled across the floor. *Idiots, she thought, we are being gassed like mice in a tunnel. And we walked straight in.*

His hand went over her mouth, trying to protect her from the gas.

She hugged him tightly.

What if this were fatal?

Never enough time, she thought, to finish things. Did she love him? What was love—except maybe the fear of losing something you've never had in the first place.

Food for thought as the gas consumed them, a lovely dream, her and Vharhin, hand in hand on a hot and dusty plain, the horizon broken by breathtaking colored mountains. A shimmering sun. Vhrazhia...

Was she destined to go there one day, with him?

She took her last breath, succumbing.

To her great surprise, she awoke again.

Though she was not herself. Not even close.

Chapter Eleven

Vharhin came to in a fury. Releasing a mighty roar he threw his body forward against the bonds. It was no use. Squinting, he tried to take stock of his situation. The lights were quite bright. He was upright, arms and legs attached to the wall in an X position. He felt like he had been beaten over the whole of his body. Every muscle screamed. Opening his jaw was agony.

His first words were of her.

"Where...is Tryla?"

The man in front of him wore a mask—black with a white painted smile and eyebrows. "How touching," he said mockingly. "It must be true love, eh?"

"What it will be is your death," said Vharhin, summoning his will. "If you do not tell me where she is...now!"

The masked man laughed. "Listen to that," he said, turning to a woman behind him. "I do believe he is serious. Should I be scared, Madame?"

Madame Duplessix approached, close enough to run a gloved finger over Vharhin's shoulder. "Perhaps you should," she cooed. "He is no ordinary Vhrazhian, are you, Prince?"

Vharhin stiffened. How could she know that?

"Are you surprised," asked the masked man, "that we guessed your little secret? Perhaps you shouldn't have blabbed it to your new girlfriend."

Vharhin clenched his fists. By all the fires of his native sun, he would destroy this man molecule by molecule. "Hear well my words," he said, his voice low and eerily calm. "If you harmed Tryla, even one hair on her head, I will hunt you down and make you long for death."

"Relax, my dear," trilled Madame Duplessix. "Your little girlfriend is unharmed. We didn't need to torture her. She has been an open channel to us all along."

"What are you talking about?"

"When she visited with the sahvria," said the masked man. "A link was provided between them. Tryla became a most effective monitoring device for us."

"You are Mr. Facia."

"In the flesh." He bowed.

"You tried to have us killed the last time we were here."

Mr. Facia laughed again, a dark, cool sound, neither human nor Vhrazhian. Vharhin wondered if he might be something else.

"I assure you, if we wanted you dead, you would have been. We were simply creating a bonding opportunity for the two of you in hopes you would reveal your true identity to her, and thereby to us. Thank you for being such a predictable, lovesick fool."

Vharhin clenched his fists. They had been using him all along. Whoever these conspirators were, he had just put a weapon in their hands infinitely more powerful than the missing ambassador.

The son of the Shodan. Heir to the Vhrazhian crown.

"Release Tryla," he demanded. "She has nothing to do with this."

"She has everything to do with it," said Madame Duplessix. "It was her who killed her beloved Chief Sonyago. Before turning her weapon on herself."

"And let's not forget how she killed you and the ambassador too," said Mr. Facia, producing Tryla's pistol.

Vharhin made another attempt to free himself, but the bands on his wrists and ankles were stronger than steel.

"You are insane!" he accused.

"Hardly," said Mr. Facia. "We know exactly what we are doing, unlike you two morons."

"What are you doing?" asked Vharhin, stalling for time. "Surely you can tell me now. I'm going to die anyway."

"And why not?" Mr. Facia said grandly. "It's the least we can do. Madame Duplessix and I represent a society of sorts, a benevolent faction, quite forward thinking. We are the ones who realize the true common interest between Vhrazhia and Erth. Each sharpens the other, like pumice stone and blade.

"Warfare is the pulse of that process. It keeps us pure and honest, true to ourselves. Your people stay Vhrazhian, we stay human."

"Those who fight become beasts," argued Vharhin. "We are little better than the Harn, who, by the way, will still need to be dealt with, whether or not we are fighting each other."

"The Harn will be tended to. There is more than enough firepower for two wars," said Mr. Facia. "The thing is, people used to peace become lazy. They must be pushed back into their natural state. We will provide them proper incentive. We on this side and our counterparts on Vhrazhia. The death of the ambassador will be the first spark. With the intelligence that has been filtered through Ananke, Vhrazhia will be able to strike a horrific blow in response. The Erth will be able to retaliate and then Vhrazhia, tit for tat.

"Fear will be pervasive along with rage and the desire for revenge. Imagine it, Prince, a string of explosions at key places on both sides, stunning terrorist attacks. It will be easy with what we have learned. Information will continue to flow, making sure

the war takes its proper course. We will control it, ensuring the balance of power remains. This time the war will last forever, as it was meant to last."

"My father will oppose you," said Vharhin, not presuming to speak for what would happen on the Erth side.

"After you are dead? Killed by an ErthSec agent?" Mr. Facia shook his head. "No, I think he will want revenge. Or perhaps his grief will paralyze him. Either way, he will not be an obstacle. Truly, we have your father to thank for sending you, and you, for being so incompetent. You are an added bonus."

Vharhin refused to cave in. Whatever mistakes he might have made so far, this game was far from over.

"Where is the ambassador? And where is Tryla?"

"So many questions," soothed Madame Duplessix, rubbing his forehead. "Why trouble yourself?"

Because I am going to destroy you and your sick plot, that's why.

"I have a right to know. You owe me the truth," he declared.

"We owe you nothing, Vhrazhian, and you do not owe us. See how clean is war, how morally simple? But you need not fear, you will see Tryla just before she kills you and the ambassador. What? Does that surprise you? Did you think I was lying? She will kill you and then, when she finds out what she's done, she will kill herself. And all of it will be blipped, entirely authentic for a universal broadcast."

Vharhin's pulse raced. These people were more devious than he'd imagined. How could they trick Tryla into killing him? Unless somehow they damaged her memories. What was it she had talked about? Memory sweeping?

If so, she could well be a stranger to him.

The thought was more deadly than death, more numbing than eternal cold. To look into her eyes and see emptiness. Could there be a worse nightmare in the universe?

Mr. Facia was laughing again, no doubt reading his thoughts.

They are worse than the Harn, he thought, for the Harn kill only for food. "I believe I was mistaken about something," said Vharhin.

"Only one thing?" asked Mr. Facia, curious.

"I said that war turns sentient creatures into beasts but there are some creatures that are born already lower than beasts."

"Thank you, that means a lot to me, coming from a corpse."

"I would rather die in my world than ever live in yours."

And yet he knew that he would not die. For he held on to something that these creatures could never understand. He had hope...and love.

"Bravo," said Facia. "We are so impressed. Aren't we, Ambassador?"

The ambassador stood at the doorway. He was gray-faced, his eyes a dull yellow. His lips were cracked. A uniformed ErthSec agent stood at either side. "Hmm?" he mumbled.

Facia chortled. "Not a very good greeting, is it, for your precious Shahar Shodan?"

The ambassador's mouth widened, his brows rising. His equilibrium had been disturbed in the most terrible way possible. He attempted to shield his eyes but the agents prevented him.

"He is the son of the Shodan? I mustn't see," he cried. "I mustn't know."

"Don't worry," said Facia. "You'll take the secret with you to the grave soon enough."

The ambassador's eyes were sealed tight. "None may know the son of the emperor...none may see him..."

"Secure him to the wall," ordered Facia.

The agents placed him next to Vharhin, ankles and wrists locked in metal bands. "Is it true?" he breathed. "Are you...him?"

"I am a ghost," said Vharhin truthfully. "One caught between worlds. Ease your mind, Ambassador, you have committed no offense in seeing me."

"But I have other offenses," he wept. "I have been with women of the Erth and I have shared my experiences with my sahvria."

Vharhin could hardly condemn him, given his own relationship with Tryla. "The balance of things is ongoing, Ambassador. Your position on this world is unlike that of any other diplomat in our history. You can't expect things to never change."

"I do not accept that. I deserve to die," he insisted.

"I agree," said Facia, snapping his fingers. "Bring me my lovely executioner. We have kept our alien guests waiting long enough."

The agents left. A few minutes later they returned with Tryla.

Vharhin called her name, feeling the life return to him.

She turned her eyes to him but did not acknowledge him.

He absorbed the blow, an invisible life-stealing smash to his chest.

His worst fear had been realized.

The woman he loved did not know him. Her mind had been wiped clean, pure as the desert after a hundred years' rain. And a million times lonelier.

Tryla adjusted her eyes to the clean white light. She was somewhat groggy, having been unconscious in a room down the hall. Two agents had awakened her, telling her that she was to come with them to receive her new assignment.

She had asked about her upcoming rest interval on the Janus Moon and they'd told her that would come soon enough.

"Does Chief Sonyago know I'm here?" she had asked.

"Your questions will be answered soon enough," one agent had replied.

She stood in the bright room with a headache. Something was wrong, though she didn't know what. It was the same sort of feeling she got when her brain tried to nibble around the edges of her swept childhood. The notorious black spot in her memories.

"Who are you all?" she asked.

The room was occupied by strangers. A man wearing a mask of a malevolent-looking painted face. A woman with long dark hair piled high on her head, voluptuous in a red, shimmering dress.

And two men against the wall. Prisoners, bound by ankles and wrists.

No, wait, they weren't men. The angle of their cheekbones was wrong and their eyes were the wrong shade. "Vhrazhians," she said with barely contained disgust.

She had never seen one in the flesh before.

"That is correct, Agent. And not just any Vhrazhians, either," said the masked man. "The one on the left is their ambassador to Erth and the one on the right is a secret agent, with the VISS."

"VISS..." She gave the word the contempt it deserved and spit on the floor. "But who the fuck are you?" it occurred to her to ask him.

"I am your superior," he said.

"I report to Chief Sonyago," she replied.

The man was holding a needle gun at his side, in his gloved hand.

"That's my weapon," she pointed out.

"Yes, it is," he agreed. "And you are going to use it to kill these two."

"Fuck that. I don't even know who you are." She turned to the other two agents. "Where's the chief?"

"Your chief is dead," he said.

"Liar!" She lunged at him, grabbing his throat.

"It's all right," the man choked as the two agents sought to intervene. "Let her find out for herself."

She yanked off his mask. "You..."

"Yes," replied Nordon, Chief of Erth Council. "Are you convinced now that I am your superior?"

She released him. "What is this nonsense about Sonyago being dead, though?"

"He is and that man killed him."

Her eyes fell on the taller man. He was a handsome specimen, for a vooz.

"That is a lie, Tryla," he said.

"How do you know my name?" she demanded.

"He's had access to the files."

"I had more than that, Tryla," he said in his deep, resonating voice. "We are partners. We have been working together, looking for the ambassador."

Councilor Nordon laughed. "You did no such thing. As for this pathetic excuse for an ambassador, he is guilty of high treason against his planet and capital espionage on ours. Agent Tryla, the information he disseminated could put millions of citizens in jeopardy."

"The Vhrazhians plan to attack?" she asked with alarm.

"Was there ever any doubt? Once a Vhrazhian, always a Vhrazhian. Peace means nothing to their kind." The Councilor handed Tryla her weapon. "Go on, take it."

She did so, hesitantly. "I'm not sure I grasp all this..."

"Tryla, look at me. Tell me you don't feel something. We were linked in Sonyago's office. That must still be there at the bottom of your brain."

"He is deceiving you," Nordon insisted. "He is a VISS agent. He tortured the chief for hours before killing them. He intended to do the same to myself and the other Council members. We will wait outside, you will conduct the execution."

The Councilor signaled for the others to fall in behind him. The door was closed and locked. Strange, why would they lock it?

"Tryla," the taller man said, continuing his pretense. "You must look inside yourself, you must believe. What can I tell you to convince you? You have a mole on your inner left thigh."

"That would be in the records," she said, fighting an unexpected blush.

"Chief Sonyago was the closest one in the world to you," he said. "That can't be on the record."

"You could have guessed it. I'm a documented loner, married to my job."

"What about Jonny G Pak?" he said.

Tryla tensed. "What about him?"

"I know he's the only other one you trust."

She frowned. "No one knows about him."

"He lives in an abandoned building, with a lot of little robots. He can fix anything —"

"Stop it," she hissed.

Vharhin complied.

"Who are you?" she demanded, approaching to point the pistol into his stomach.

"I am the son of the Emperor of Vhrazhia. I am your lover. Your partner."

Her finger squeezed the trigger nearly halfway. "Prepare to die...liar."

That's when he did the unexpected.

She gasped, her lips captured cleanly by his. The kiss was confident, bold but strangely intimate. She was instantly wet between her legs. She breathed his scent, like some kind of exotic plant, tendrils slithering, blooming under an alien sky.

Her nipples peaked against him.

"Well?" He released her.

"That...proves nothing," she breathed.

"Your memory was erased," he insisted. "We came here together and then we were captured by these people. I ended up here and you were taken elsewhere, for a memsweep. It must be affecting only your short-term memory."

"That's absurd." She shook her head, though at the moment it seemed no more incredible than anything else. Could Sonyago really be dead?

"Think hard, Tryla. There might be some trace left. You went with me to a pub yesterday. Can you recall what we had to drink?"

Tryla tried to remember. The pub was there, all right, the table and a glass. But what had been in it?

"I was there alone. That's all that matters."

"You had etherbeer. We both did."

Her brain was pounding. She sought desperately to see the full glass in her mind's eye but it wasn't there. A sick feeling hit the bottom of her stomach. Something had been edited in her brain. It was like Swiss cheese, little holes here and there.

"You're crazy," she said, not wanting to accept.

"We were in the office of your Chief Sonyago, that is where we met," he continued. "We went to my embassy, talked to the sahvria, before we went to the pub. We kissed."

More Swiss cheese, too many holes to make sense of things.

This didn't feel like memsweep, though, more like she was the crazy one. "My mind...it's splitting apart."

"Hold it together, Tryla. They tried to take it all from you but you are still retaining something, because of our bond. We can't be completely separated. What day is it?"

"Tuesday," she said.

"No, it's Friday. They took three days. They took me, they took the case, the missing ambassador but I'm still in there. You remember the pub."

"I need to kill you." She leveled the pistol. "You're the enemy."

"Can you take the chance? What if I'm right? Use your intuition, it's what you're best at. Do I feel like an enemy?"

Damn it, she couldn't pull the trigger.

That felt familiar. Had this happened before?

"If I let you live I will be disobeying the orders of the Chief Councilor," she pointed out.

"You're not about following orders, Tryla. You're about finding the truth. If there's a chance Nordon is a liar and a traitor, shouldn't you try to check that possibility out?"

"You're confusing me. Stop it."

"That's it, fight with me."

"I don't want to fight with you," she insisted.

"Yes you do, you enjoy it and you aren't half bad at it, though I think you do some other things well too."

She glanced quickly at the other Vhrazhian, who was pretending not to listen. For some reason, this self-proclaimed prince was managing to embarrass her. "I am not telling you again," she warned him. "Knock it off."

She aimed at his testicles. He was unfazed.

"I particularly enjoy how you writhe as I bring you to orgasm with my tongue," he said.

The door was opening.

"You don't have much time to make up your mind, Tryla," he said. "Let me live and I'll take you to Sonyago."

Tryla's heart leaped. "He's alive?"

"No but there's a chance he could be brought back."

"You." She aimed her weapon at the other man. "Is he lying or not?"

"I have no idea," the Vhrazhian said, shaking his head miserably.

Tryla frowned. She would probably regret this, if she lived at all.

"I still intend to kill you," she said, freeing his left wrist. "As soon as you take me to Sonyago."

"Point made."

In a matter of seconds both Vhrazhians were freed.

The door burst open and the attack was on.

Vharhin took the weapon from her, she did not resist.

A strange sense of calm overtook her as he ushered her behind him, his body tensed, poised for victory.

Chapter Twelve

Vharhin hoped she would be impressed by the fact that he knew how to find Jonny G Pak's building. She remained skeptical, insisting such knowledge could be obtained by a good enough agent.

"Do I strike you as that kind of agent?" he asked her.

"No," she said with a frown. "You seem like a first-class troublemaker."

"I am." His hand went to her thigh.

She managed to work the air car controls one-handed while she aimed the gun at the side of his head with the other. "I would think twice about that if I were you."

He couldn't suppress his grin. "You like to do that," he informed her. "A lot."

"I also like ejecting people who annoy me. Have I done that very much?"

"No," he admitted. "You haven't. Though I appreciate the warning."

"Oh, don't worry, you will never see it coming."

"I'm sure I won't. By the way, I hope you are prepared to feel pretty humble, because Jonny has met me and he is going to verify all this."

"Of course he will," she said dryly. "Right before he tells us all about how the Solstice Fairy appears in his sanitizing chamber once a year and paints his toenails blue."

On that note, Tryla maneuvered the air car into the garage. This time Jonny did not come out to greet them. Instead he had two of his diminutive, gleaming robots lead them through the door directly into his realm as he called it.

Vharhin hoped this meant he was having success in his attempts to resurrect Sonyago. He really did not want Tryla to have to go through the horror of discovering her beloved mentor in lifeless pieces a second time, especially since it would register to her as the first.

Jonny's quarters occupied the entire first floor. The walls had been knocked out and the ceiling, too, allowing a view straight up to the roof. All that remained of the various demolished floors above the first was a series of makeshift balconies, like shelves sticking out of the four walls. Broken robots and pieces of robots were lined up all along the railings of the balconies, thereby creating the effect of an enormous audience on all four sides, staring down at the main floor.

Jonny's living and work spaces were completely jumbled. His sleep pad lay next to a diagnostic engine tester while his personal food-making system was built into the back of some kind of miniature electronic assembly line.

It was a tech lover's paradise, completely hidden from prying eyes.

Jonny greeted them, climbing down one of the many flights of stairs. He called Vharhin by name.

Needless to say, Tryla didn't take to defeat well.

"You know him?" she said.

"Yeah, why wouldn't I?" he asked, puzzled. "You brought him here."

In the ensuing melee, she yelled and screamed at Jonny G Pak, calling him a serious deviant with a warped sense of humor.

Jonny finally threw up his gloved hands. "I swear, Tryla, he was here. You two were cuffed together, you said he was your partner. You were looking for the ambassador."

"She has obviously been mind swept," said Vharhin to Jonny.

"I wonder what all they removed," he said.

"Stop talking about me like I'm not here," Tryla demanded.

"Tryla," trilled a feminine voice. "Must you carry on so?"

"Sonya," she exclaimed.

The robot standing in the doorway was an older model, not the one previously occupied by the sentient intelligence known as Sonyago. There was no mistaking the voices emanating from the single head, however.

"And me, assuming I still count," said Yago.

Tryla hugged the android. "What happened to you guys?"

"We were dead," they said in unison. "Or so we've been told."

"I pulled the backup," said Jonny. "We are dealing with Sonyago as they existed a month ago."

"I am Vharhin," he introduced himself.

"Yes, we have heard about you. Jonny has given us an update."

"This has been such an ordeal," said Sonya. "I think it's important we all pay attention to our feelings."

"I'm feeling pretty pissed off," said Tryla. "Don't tell me you guys are going to buy into this crap about me being partners with this obnoxious Vhrazhian?"

"You were more than partners," said Ananke. "You were hot and heavy. Trust me, partners don't fight like you two."

"I would never be intimate with an alien," she said with a proud finality.

Vharhin's lips angled sharply. Her denial did not upset or sadden him. He took it as a challenge. He intended to refresh her memory fully.

"Wipe that smile off your face," Tryla snapped. "I am completely serious—you could not be more sexually unattractive to me."

"I think she needs a spanking," said Ananke.

Tryla turned on her. "You," she pointed. "I'll bet I didn't like you before, did I?"

"Careful," Ananke warned. "That kind of attitude got you in trouble the last time."

Tryla snorted. "I'm so scared...not."

"Tryla, be civil," said Yago. "This is a confusing situation for all of us. We must examine our deepest hearts. Jonny would not lie to us. And even if he were lying, how do we explain that we are here? Sonya and I with a different body, no less?"

Tryla frowned. "Just tell me what I'm supposed to do. You are the chief."

"Indeed, we are," said Yago. "Or at least we were. The world considers us dead."

"The situation is not good," said Vharhin, leaving aside for the moment his soaring happiness at having saved Tryla and managed their escape without a scratch. "The senior Erth official has just been shot down in crossfire at a pleasure den, along with the Madame and two ErthSec agents. Tryla may well have been identified as a suspect, along with myself and the ambassador. We have no proof of the conspiracy and no knowledge of how far it extends."

"They must all be exposed," said Sonya. "The world must know."

"Easier said than done," said Yago.

"It must be done," said Sonya. "Failure is not an option."

"It could mean civil war," said Yago.

"We must work within our most trusted network," said Sonya. "We must arrest all the traitors."

"Start with my client list," suggested Ananke.

"It is crucial to work in secret," said Yago. "We must create a cover story for the death of Nordon, divert any attention from a link to Vhrazhia. Vharhin, what of your ambassador?"

Vharhin's brain was humming along very nonlinear paths. "I do not believe he is guilty of anything besides poor judgment in trusting his sahvria. His visits to the Comfort Zone will be dealt with, later. For now, it would be best to keep both he and the sahvria here, keep the conspirators on my side guessing. I suspect Lord Fhirvhi, the Minister of State, and perhaps some of the generals. I must return home to discover for sure."

"Yes, very nice," said Tryla. "It's been a pleasure not knowing you."

"You must come with me," declared Vharhin.

Tryla laughed without humor. "Oh, I don't think so."

"Explain your reasoning, Vharhin," said Yago.

"Surely you aren't going to listen to him?" Tryla exclaimed.

"Tryla," said Sonya. "Is that emotional denial I hear?"

"No, it's the voice of the only sane person in the room!"

"Tryla is a sure target, even without her memories," said Vharhin in response to Yago. "You'd have to expend energy protecting her. And I need a human to take with me, someone to help me convince my father that it is possible for our races to connect."

"I would rather connect with a skunkweed," said Tryla.

Yago cleared his throat. "With all due respect, Prince Vharhin, are you sure she would present the, um, unity you are seeking?"

Vharhin had no idea. He hoped that his intuition wasn't hopelessly mired in his lust for Tryla. "We linked once," he insisted. "I believe the bond is still there. They managed to chop her memories but they aren't swept. They can come back."

"There is no precedent for this," said Sonya.

Vharhin was past the point of no return. "There is something else I want as well."

"Yes?" said Yago.

"Tryla's lost memories," he said. "From childhood. I believe they should be restored to her."

He wanted possession of her lost memories!

Tryla had run out of indignation. There was no limit to this man's gall.

Unfortunately, there didn't appear to be any limit to his effect on her libido, either. She was throbbing between her thighs and the more he and the others kept on with their outlandish insistence that they had been lovers, the more she wanted it to be true.

Every time he looked at her she got hot and flushed and weak. Had he really seen her naked, touched her body, plunged between her legs with his cock...his tongue? Had she moaned for him, whimpered? Had she reached orgasm?

"You keep your stinking hands off my memories," she exclaimed. "And me too."

"Do not argue with me, Tryla," he said. "You know I am right."

"Like hell you are!"

"Chief Sonyago," Vharhin said. "Will you order Tryla to accompany me?"

There were whispers back and forth, consultations between the two.

It was Sonya who spoke. "Prince Vharhin, I do not believe we can accommodate you. It is unclear if this is in the best interests of ErthSec or of Agent Tryla."

"I see," he said. He was standing very straight and tall. Tryla could easily fall at his feet.

"In that case, Chief, I must invoke Article 67, section two, paragraph one of the Vhrazhian-Erth Peace Treaty."

Sonyago's artificial brain whirled for a moment, looking it up. "The inalienability of planetary nationals from duly designated and assigned properties?" said Yago. "But I fail to see the link."

"I claim this woman as mate," he said. "She is therefore my duly designated property. She will return with me to my home world."

You could hear a micrometer drop.

"Prince," said Yago, his electronic voice slightly hoarse. "Do I understand you correctly? You are...claiming her?"

"She is mine," said Vharhin, furthering the reality. "She will go as I go, under protection of my hand."

Tryla looked around the room, her hair swirling. "Surely someone's going to laugh now?"

"I saw it coming all along," said Ananke.

"It does seem fitting in a way," said Jonny.

"I can't believe what I'm hearing," exclaimed Tryla. "You can't all be serious."

"Prince Vharhin," said Sonya. "This is a sensitive matter. Perhaps you and Tryla should discuss it alone."

"Mates are not negotiated with," he said with a finality that made her toes curl. "They are taken."

"No one is taking me," she insisted.

Vharhin addressed her, as though she had offered no objection whatsoever. "Say goodbye to your friends. You will not see them for some time."

"In your dreams!"

Vharhin grabbed her arm. "Do not turn your back on me."

"You're the one shouldn't turn your back on me," she snarled.

The ensuing struggle lasted all of ten seconds.

Vharhin hoisted her over his shoulder, facedown.

"Let me go," she squealed, utterly helpless.

"This is for her own good," said Vharhin to Sonyago. "I would see my lifeblood spilled across the heavens before I would see harm come to this female."

"Of this we have no doubt," said Sonyago.

"Don't let him do this," she cried.

"I hope it will be possible to leave this place in friendship," said Vharhin to the assembled.

"Who cares what anyone else thinks?" She was squirming and kicking. "I'm the one being kidnapped."

"May I access her memories?" said Vharhin.

"It can be done through Jonny's machines," said Yago. "But understand, if she takes them back, she will no longer be an ErthSec agent."

"I won't impose them," Vharhin promised. "It will be her choice."

"Like this is my choice? I'm so fucking comforted," she snapped.

He patted her bottom. "Mind your language, Erthwoman."

She released a cry of frustration, made all the worse because it sounded so damn female.

What was this man doing to her? And what made him think he could keep her like some kind of pet?

A Vhrazhian's mate.

This couldn't be happening.

How was she supposed to live at a man's feet, pleasuring and being pleased?

Her pussy was on fire. She so wished her body would not keep wriggling its way over to the enemy side.

"I will fight you," she vowed as, some minutes later, he carried him to the air car. "Every step of the way."

She was still over his shoulder like an ancient sack of potatoes. He walked with a confident, infuriatingly sexy air, her memories on a card in his pocket and the tacit consent of her boss and her only other friend in the world.

"I'm not only expecting it," he declared. "I'm counting on it."

Chapter Thirteen

Vharhin had made either the boldest move in the history of his race...or the most foolish.

Perhaps it was a little of both.

Tryla had her own opinions, which she did not keep to herself.

Vharhin could have written a thesaurus of Erth invectives based on Tryla's verbal assault on the way to the Embassy. He made the point to her that this was all for her own good and for the good of their investigation, though he was only half convinced himself.

He didn't want her going off half-cocked and getting herself killed trying to avenge the murder—or attempted murder of Sonyago—not when he needed her assistance, her mental acuity back on Vhrazhia. But the truth was that he had no reason to think she couldn't handle herself, he only knew that he was afraid for her.

Not to mention afraid for what might become of him if he were to try to live without her in his life.

The main point, though, was the mission. They were a team, they had to finish together, even if she didn't see that. Granted, proclaiming her his mate in front of a senior Erth official was not exactly an ideal solution but sometimes a man must think on the spot.

Hopefully this would be understood.

By her and by his father too.

Vharhin would go first to the emperor, explain everything. His father might not approve of all of his decisions but he would see that he had done the best he could. And he would also know the way forward, how to finish their mission and resolve the problem of his having pledged himself to Tryla forever.

At least Vharhin hoped he would.

Vharhin stood at the teleporter now, double-checking the computations. He did not look forward to the trip. Having one's atoms scrambled was not an overly pleasant sensation though it was short-lived. The particle beam was hyper-light speed, which meant it took only a few minutes to cross the dark reaches of space.

One day this would be a normal means of conveyance. For now it was still experimental, available only to the elite for special trips such as this.

The passengers, if that was the right word, were required to stand upright inside a silver tube. An operator on each end of the journey assured the proper transmission protocols. There were two tubes here at the Embassy. He would stand freely upright for the journey. Tryla, on the other hand? To put it bluntly, she was bound and gagged.

Wrapped in a clear cohesive, rather like an ancient mummy. The material hugged her shapely form, accentuating the curves he loved so well.

The gag consisted of a bio-degradable sponge, pleasant-tasting. It was designed to cause no choking, though it absorbed all sound.

Clearly she had a lot to say, given the furious intensity of her eyes. He would have to deal with her again but he would do so on Vhrazhia, in the isolation of his own quarters.

She would see reason or at the very least forgive him.

If all else failed, he would kiss her.

That always seemed to do the trick.

Though they could, under no circumstances, have sex again.

For he had called her his mate and the words were working on his heart, reflecting deep into the cells of his male body.

If he took her again, there might be no separating them. She would be addicted to him and him to her.

Gone would be the age-old stability and tradition of the Imperial throne, not to mention the fragile balance between his world and hers—one which depended on each species keeping its distance from the other.

Love...

In this case it could prove as dangerous, or more dangerous, than the conspiracy itself.

His father—he must see him at once, as soon as he returned home.

Tryla couldn't get any leverage against the damn tape. It had some kind of absorptive ability, using her own energy against her. The bastard wasn't really going to do this, was he? It was kidnapping. She hated him, she didn't want to spend another minute with him, much less become his mate.

His mate. Had he lost the little bit of sense he had? The very idea of it...being called his property. She would make him pay for that, among other things.

"The journey will last a few minutes," he was saying to her, as though his words or presence might provide any comfort. "It can feel a bit like free fall but I'll be right here next to you."

She screamed at him through the gag. Nothing came out.

"We will see each other," he assured her as the silver tube began to descend over her head. "Very soon."

Not if I'm lucky, she thought. *Maybe my atoms will reassemble somewhere else, the Janus Pleasure Moon or even the Penal Mining Colony on Mars.* Anywhere, so long as he wasn't there.

Vharhin stood next to her. A silver tube came down over his head as well. She attempted to jump into the air, rock her body from side to side.

Nothing. The tape sapped her completely. She might as well be a statue. The only thing she could do was blink her eyes. She did so and just like that everything blanked out.

He was wrong—it wasn't like free fall. It was like slow-motion meltdown. She was aware of her own heartbeat. And his. It was like dissolving into a puddle across the floor. Or was that just her mind playing tricks?

Tryla decided she didn't like teleporting.

I'm here.

Instinctively, she reached out for the hand, fleshless. His hand. Strong, dominant, enveloping. Tryla hated herself for drawing comfort, for needing him or anything else.

This blackness, if that's what it was, was too much like trying to remember. Her childhood. And more recently, him.

She was supposed to have known him.

Intimately.

But it couldn't be. She wouldn't choose a male like him. A vooz!

Tryla was dropping off the edge of a cliff. So this was what Vharhin had meant. She screamed again. She had no voice, no mouth, no tongue. She was atoms, theoretical particles, scattered, beamed.

Into oblivion.

Another scream and the lights came back on.

Harsh orange light. No, not quite orange. Amber, golden amber.

The color of Vharhin's sun.

Like the Embassy sky under the dome when he had brought her from Jonny's building. Only this was not artificial. This was the real thing.

The silver tube was gone. Vharhin was in front of her, peeling off the tape. She felt groggy. She fell forward into his arms.

"You'll be a little sleepy," he said. "The effects wear off."

He took the gag from her mouth. She summoned the strength to curse him. It came out slurred, lacking the force it deserved.

Later...she would say it better later.

Vharhin emerged from the Sapphire Chamber, Seat of the Emperor Vhrakhar, Delight of the Heavens, Supreme Father of the Vhrazhian People. The meeting had lasted less than ten minutes. Vharhin had made his report, succinct and devoid of all personal emotion and interjection. His father had listened—implacable, expressionless.

Never once in all his years had Vharhin seen a crack in that living mask. So much depended upon that face. All of the Empire looked to it for favor, for portent and

blessing. Careers rose and fell, the direction of the Dynasty came from his eyes, from the twitches of his lips.

He spoke only through a chosen few. His Viziers, his Beloved Mate, the Shodana...and his son.

It would not have been apparent, seeing the Shodan's response, that the words he heard were utterly without precedence, their content so dynamic and fraught with both opportunity and danger as to render all previous realities pale in comparison.

His reflections—which were of a bond stronger than blood and of more power than steel—were contained to a bare minimum, a few sentences, pithily constructed, like ancient Erth poetry.

The recommendations were sound and more importantly, they gave Vharhin the needed stability to proceed. From one moment to the next, one breath to another.

For now, all was resolved.

Though things would surely change when he laid eyes upon Tryla again. At the moment she slept in his chambers, having been exhausted from the teleportation.

The Shodan had told him that he must treat Tryla as a Vhrazhian noblewoman, as though she might in fact be preparing for formal mating. He must, under no circumstances, have any more intercourse, however, as that might tip the balance into full biological coveting.

The tension would remain until a more permanent solution presented itself. Vharhin could move neither forward nor backward. He could no more take her as mate in full completeness than he could reject her. Either would be ruinous.

Vharhin had no clue what the solution would be.

Worrying was foolish, though, and time-consuming.

The Shodan wished to meet Tryla. The Shodana would also be present.

In keeping with Tryla's unique status, she would be treated in a special category, as though she were a universe unto herself, on a par with the Empire, whose voice and being was the emperor.

Vharhin did not understand the details.

They would unfold in action.

Tryla was also to serve as his partner in the ongoing investigation. She would be presented to those outside the royal family for the time being as the daughter of a merchant with whom Vharhin was doing business on Erth. None would dare question that.

No arrests would be made at present.

The Commander of the Intelligence Service, a man loyal to the emperor, would be alerted to place all parties under surveillance.

The military would be brought in line as much as possible.

Vharhin wanted to get to work immediately but the emperor had insisted he and Tryla remain in the palace for dinner that evening.

Which left him the day to prepare Tryla.

His father was counting on him.

Then again, so was Tryla.

Clearing his mind of all thoughts, he returned to his chambers. She was there, just as he had left her, sound asleep. He felt a rush of emotion, the very antithesis of what he had felt in the emperor's presence.

If he could have, Vharhin would have asked his father a question. *Did you feel turmoil too, when first you loved the Shodana?*

Continuing to observe Tryla's sleeping form, he removed his uniform and donned a robe.

His cock was hard. His heart was swollen. He wanted her here...forever.

Making his mind up suddenly, he went first for the ropes before waking her. She did not stir as he bound her wrists and ankles.

He told himself there was a logical reason for this, though he could not think of a single one.

Tryla awoke in the center of an exquisitely soft bed. The cover was golden like fleece, only richer. The walls were also gold. Tall columns, black and shiny as marble, lined the spaces in between, like a silent forest of stone. Overhead stretched a dome of blue, painted with copper stars. She moved to stretch her limbs and discovered they were tied.

Was she dreaming?

A firm pull at each of her arms and legs revealed she was not.

"Welcome back." The man above her smiled, the one called Vharhin who had stolen her and brought her here, bound and gagged, having claimed to be her lover.

He had changed from his Erth-style uniform into a robe of crimson. It was half closed over his smooth, muscular chest. The coloring of his skin was ruddy, close to human but with a bit of gold and copper rubbed in. He had combed out his long dark hair. It glistened, hanging loose. "You must have been tired," he said, his voice way too soothing for her comfort. "You slept for hours."

"Why the fuck am I tied down?" she rasped, feeling like she had small stones in the back of her throat.

"For your safety."

She clenched her fists, wrists wrapped in silky rope and attached to the bedposts. "You're the only one whose safety is in danger."

Something else was wrong. She felt soft material against her skin—silk—flowing, pale yellow, no nether closure. "Where in hell are my clothes?" she demanded.

"Your Erth garment is not appropriate in the Imperial Palace," he said.

Tryla scowled. The garment was painfully thin. Her nipples were hard underneath. She could not close her legs. She was moistening. "You have no right," she cried. "You are a monster, not any kind of man."

"I won't take advantage of you, Tryla," he read her mind. "A Vhrazhian does not take a female who is not fully aroused and committed. She must be free to come to him, to respond fully."

"I'm not your female." She was thrashing on the bed, like a cornered animal. He had taken her boots too, left her barefoot. "Why can't you get that through your thick head?"

He sat down beside her, his weight causing a cavity to open beneath her. "You must settle down, Tryla. There is much we need to discuss."

His hand was on her thigh.

"Don't you touch me!"

The heat was explosive, searing.

"I will touch you as I am required to."

"How is this not taking advantage of me?" she demanded.

He rubbed her flesh through the silk. "Because this is not for my pleasure, it is for your education."

"Education?" She spat the word. "For what? To be your slave girl?"

He smelled clean and slightly sweet. A little bit like musk but more exotic. A jungle maybe, or a desert teeming with powerful creatures of prey and beautiful exotic flowers blooming in the crystal sands.

"Vhrazhians do not keep females as slaves," he told her. "Unlike humans, who do so in secret while decrying others."

"No more word games. Just let me go."

Her hair felt clean and bouncy. There was perfume on her body. What had he done—fattened her up for some sexual kill?

"I can't do that, Tryla. You have been summoned by my father, the Shodan. To refuse would be a capital offense."

"You're the one who needs to be up on charges—kidnapping, interplanetary human trafficking—"

"I know the laws of Erth. Do you know mine?"

"No. And I don't care."

"I declared you to be my mate. I could not go back on my word and leave you behind, nor can I let you go now."

"You sure as shit can. And you will!"

"No." He shook his head. "That isn't possible. We are at an impasse, we can't go back and yet there are complications in proceeding with any union."

"Yeah! For one thing I hate your guts."

"I think you feel other emotions but we must try to be rational at the moment."

She arched a brow. "Well, that's real easy, with you getting me all hot and bothered."

He frowned. His hand was on her stomach, caressing. As if he didn't even know it was there.

Clearing his throat, he proceeded. "We are partners, first and foremost. Though you have no memory of it, we work effectively together."

She rolled her eyes. "I am so sure."

"The proof lies in the fact of our having found the ambassador and unraveled the criminal conspiracy behind his disappearance. Unfortunately, the monster has many heads, on your world and mine."

"If you ask me, you're behind it."

"You wouldn't say that if you had your memory."

"Why? Because you're supposed to be so good in bed?" she taunted. "Because I have melted before your Vhrazhian sex powers?"

"You and I have indeed made love. On more than one occasion you begged me to, in fact. Sexually, it is safe to say, you are my conquest, Tryla. As for my pheromones, they are real and you were exposed to them. They appeared to have affected you only temporarily, during the sexual act itself. I am taking the risk now to try to help you remember."

She stared at him. Was there no end to his delusions of grandeur? "If I did have sex with you, I must have been extremely drunk."

"Alcohol was not required, nor I think, were the pheromones. I believe that you were extremely attracted to me."

"Really? I must have had to fight my way through your bloated ego to get to you."

"Vhrazhians are not egotistical, they state the facts."

"Your race is a bunch of oppressive women haters. How is that for a fact?"

"I won't have these arguments with you again, Tryla."

"Why? Afraid you will lose a second time?"

His hand moved to her breast.

"Hey, cut that out!"

He molded her flesh softly, knowingly. "I will do what I have to, Tryla, to win control of you."

"I don't even know what you want." She squirmed.

"I want you to behave. I want you to talk with me about the case, be my partner. And later we will meet my father and mother."

She released a frustrated moan. "This isn't the way to make me cooperate, Vharhin."

"It will work," he said with a confidence that made her furious and horny at the same time.

His fingers grazed her nipples. "I am not going to let you come, Tryla, though you will beg me."

"Never." She gritted her teeth.

"You speak too quickly. I have noticed that about your species."

He moved to the other nipple, his touch so light, as much pain as pleasure.

She tried unsuccessfully to stifle a whimper. "Please..."

"I've only just begun, Erthwoman. You have much more to endure, much more to remember. We have done this before, you and I, you have surrendered to me already."

"Cocksucker," she hissed, her breath shallow, desperate.

"Look into my eyes," he instructed.

"Fuck yourself!"

Vharhin moved his hands to the top of her silk covering. He grasped either side above her breasts, tearing the material straight down, all the way to the bottom.

She gasped, exposed.

His eyes lingered on her flesh, anticipating. She watched, fascinating, dreading.

He teased the smooth skin of her stomach and then moved lower.

"What I know of you, Erthwoman, is burned in my soul," he said. "I have memorized your body."

His thumb found her clit. Damn...it really did feel like he'd been there before. Either that or he was one good guesser about how her desires worked.

Tryla was panting for him, the liquids of her sex dripping freely, her fragrance filling the room.

"Look into my eyes," he repeated.

She did so, naked, bound, helpless.

"You are a brilliant agent," he said. "Your mind amazes and intrigues me. I need your help to fix things. To do so you must work side by side with me, taking my lead in all matters social and formal. You will behave in a deferential way, enough to allow us to accomplish our work. No one aside from my father is aware that I have been to Erth to conduct an investigation. We'll pass you off as the daughter of some Erth official, whom I have befriended in my business ventures, of which I have many. Were you Vhrazhian, such a relationship would not be possible, but you are alien, so you need not be limited to our ways. Eyebrows will be raised, murmuring will occur. But that will help us expose our enemies."

Tryla tried to focus on his words even as her gaze moved inexorably to his—golden amber, with a glint of copper, the color of his sun, the color of the strangely shaped

shields on the wall. Row after row and weapons too, spears and axes and triple-bladed swords.

There was so much to absorb. This case was obviously of vital importance. The Crown Prince himself was involved and Sonyago would not have allowed her to be brought here if he were not trustworthy and if they weren't going to be able to work together. Certainly there was some kind of chemistry between her and Vharhin. She didn't usually fight with people so well, trading barbs and keeping on a level footing.

Though things were hardly level at the moment. Arching her back, she writhed for him, offering, yielding. She would do anything.

"I need to come," she sighed.

He had told her she would beg, though...and that he would refuse.

"You're not paying attention." He inserted a finger deep inside her, invading her wet cavity.

"F-fuck me," she moaned.

He let her move against his hand. She was on the verge of vaginal orgasm.

"Yessss," she cried.

"You are not in control, Tryla." Just like that, his hand was gone.

She cried out in frustration, her body on fire, craving the release. "V-Vharhin..."

"You will do this my way. On my world, I drive...always."

"Y-you drive," she agreed.

What did that mean? Was it a metaphor? Something stirred deep inside her, a recollection of being in a vehicle with Vharhin.

"I will respect you. I will consider all that you say. I fully expect your insights will exceed my own. But you'll obey, Tryla, whether or not you understand my orders at a given moment."

"I...will..." she breathed.

He put his glistening fingers to her lips. She parted them, softly sucking. Her fluids tasted sweet, wicked. There was another taste with it—salty. It was Vharhin's sweat. She took it into her mouth. There was a slight burning sensation.

What the hell was in his sweat, anyway?

Was this the biochemical effect Sonya had warned her about, the one that affected a female like alcohol, leaving her defenseless and craving more?

Vharhin paused to kiss her.

His mouth burned her. His lips tasted like the desert, pelted by searing rain. The kiss ended too soon. She was ready to give her very soul for another little dab, tongue to tongue, the press of mouth against mouth.

"You'll try," he said. "But you are a stubborn female, strong-willed as any male. Just know that I will punish you, Tryla, just like I am doing now. You keep that in mind when we meet the Shodan and Shodana."

She bit down on his finger. He smiled at her act of rebellion. She released him, afraid of the look in his eyes.

Retaliation was swift.

"Oh, stars," she cried. "Oh...my fucking stars."

He was nibbling her nipple, making her need the sharp sensation, somewhere between pain and pleasure. Her body began to quiver and quake. "C-can't hold back..."

Tryla climaxed all on her own, no attention to her soaked, starving pussy. It was an utter and complete release, a taking of her body by dark forces, silent and dominating. Every nerve in her body tensed...and then released. She went down the river, over the edge of the falls, gasping, moaning.

Vharhin continued to nibble, using her, enjoying her body.

Tryla clenched her fists, trying to shut down. She couldn't. She was horny again, already.

"Were you given permission to come, Tryla?"

She tossed her head on the pillow. "No."

"There will be punishment. We will begin again."

Tears were in her eyes. "I can't take any more. Vharhin, make love to me?"

"I cannot," he said, his will a thousand times stronger than the strongest artificial metal.

"Kiss me, then," she begged.

A sense of déjà vu filled her mind. Had she asked him to do this before? In the spaces in between her lost memories?

Let him fill them in now, let her become whatever he wanted, whatever he saw her to be. Such a paradox, tying her down and stripping her like this, utterly reducing her while at the same time lifting her up, affirming, even cherishing her.

"Please, Vharhin, kiss me?"

He hesitated. There was pain on his face, not cruelty. What was behind those eyes? What weight did he bear? The crushing of thousands of years of tradition, the merciless demands of his responsibilities? All that, yes, but she saw something else too. Plain old worry for her, for him, for them both.

She craned her neck to meet him. She wanted him to have her strength, whatever might be inside her, for his use. His eyes slid closed as their lips molded. His fingers moved to her cheeks, splayed, holding her face with infinite gentleness combined with fierce protectiveness.

No free woman, no female of Erth should want such a thing. It rendered her much too defenseless. But she had gone too far. Only one way now and that was forward.

The kiss lasted forever—light, a timeless dream, caught between the golden bed and his heated mouth, Vhrazhian hot. Boiling point...

At last his fingers returned to her body, his hands reclaiming. For a split second she rejoiced. And then she remembered.

She was being punished.

"You will have everything," he said. "Except satisfaction."

"Wh-what are you doing?"

Vharhin moved down between her legs. He licked the tips of her toes. "I am going to arouse every millimeter of your body."

She moaned as he took her big toe into his mouth, suckling.

The sensations were light and teasing, like a tiny whip along her spine. Was he really going to do this to her whole body?

"This doesn't seem very dominant." She tried to divert him. "You sucking my toes."

"A Vhrazhian male enjoys his female in every way. Her every possible response delights him because he owns her."

She thrashed in her bonds. "You can't own me."

He licked the bottom of her foot, a slow caress. She cried out. "Son of a bitch!"

"But I do, Tryla, by the laws of this planet. Your own body is in agreement."

"My body lies."

Very slowly he administered kisses up her lower leg, stopping at her knee. He caressed her calf.

"Your helplessness arouses you. Do you recall nothing of how it was between us? You needed to be tamed and I was the one to tame you."

"Just leave me alone," she cried.

"Why would I do that? When I can do this..." He ran his tongue along her inner thigh, awakening the nerve endings. Her pussy spasmed, aching for contact.

"Please, oh, stars, please," she groaned. "Put me out of my misery. I'll call you master. I'll be the most servile little creature you could imagine."

"I don't want that."

"What then?" She nearly screamed the words. "What the fuck do you want?"

"I want you as you were. I want my Tryla back."

The way he said the words, the emphasis on "my Tryla" made her believe for the first time that maybe all of it was true, their prior relationship, the feelings he seemed to have for her.

"I don't know where she is," she said, her voice soft and breaking.

"Then we will find her," he said, wiping a tear from her eye. "Together."

Chapter Fourteen

Vharhin knew it was time for mercy.

Tryla had shed tears, admitting her ultimate weakness to him. Releasing her from her bonds, he held her shivering body.

He could feel her raw heat. She was as close to orgasm as a woman could get.

“Open,” he whispered.

She parted her thighs allowing him access to her glorious, thrumming sex. He pushed his fingers inside, allowing her to squeeze his knuckles between her thighs, exploding in slow, still motion again and again, her eyes glazed, otherworldly as an ancient goddess. He even let her rub against his thigh, clutching, groaning, whimpering.

“Come,” he said, speaking softly into her ear.

The orgasm came in slow motion, a wave washing over her body. She groaned like a woman slain. She writhed, arching her back, seizing the pleasure even as it ravaged her senses.

He had never seen a woman so passionate. He craved to be inside her but he would not take her with his turgid cock. Nor would he allow her to touch it or take it in her mouth as she wished.

One brush of her fingertips, one tiny kiss from her lips along his shaft and he would surely explode. He didn’t desire just one orgasm but two or three.

All those pheromones released. He dared not take the chance, not with the vulnerable state she was in. She had resisted him earlier but that was when she was in full possession of her identity.

Now the pheromones might fully affect her, serving their devastating purpose. Like an intoxicant shot straight into her blood, changing her irrevocably.

There was the chance she would no longer be free. She might become dependent, willing to trade anything to be with him, just as a Vhrazhian woman would.

In that one respect he might not have been fully truthful with Tryla. Vhrazhians did not keep females as slaves but the biology dictated a certain amount of servility.

The effects were not uniform. How the mating relationship looked, how the female’s vulnerability took shape vis-à-vis the strengths of the male, varied from case to case.

Some female mates, particularly in the early phases of the union, could scarcely leave their beds, so much did they pine and yearn. A male could easily capitalize.

"You will be here when I return," he would tell her, departing for his daily tasks. "You will be ready."

"Yes, my lord," she would sigh, hands overhead, palms up in submission. She would have only sex on her mind, toss and turn, burning, scarcely breathing until his return. And then he would have her through the night.

Little eating was done in the house of a freshly mated couple.

Over time, with duty, things changed.

The ambassador and his sahvria—they were no longer consumed with each other's pleasure. The ambassador had hoped to rekindle the spark, to excite his female's helpless libido by gallivanting throughout the Comfort Zone. Little did he realize those experiences were not meant for her alone, not meant to stimulate their own lovemaking at all but rather to further the warlike desires of others.

It had to be Fhirvhi. As the ambassador's brother, he would have had access to the sahvria. He would be able to turn her mind, to seduce her to his dark plan. And all he had needed to promise, so it seemed, was a place as one of his concubines, not even as his mate.

Almost certainly Fhirvhi was onto Vharhin. By now, thanks to his communication with the Erth conspirators, he would know both his identity and his mission on Erth. Would he go so far as to attempt to have him killed? This seemed unthinkable but up until recently he would have thought it unimaginable that a Vhrazhian official would provide military secrets to the enemy, even in a delusional expression of patriotism.

But that's exactly what had happened and now that Fhirvhi was exposed, he would have to do something. They were safe here in the palace. Other than his parents, there were only the servants and the Palace Guard and they had been there for generations, reared in utter seclusion from the world.

Many did not know there was an Erth Federation, much less that they had waged a war against it. His own mother had never been off the palace grounds.

His father, by contrast, had led numerous battles and earned, with merit, the highest medals of the Empire for bravery.

Vharhin would never fill such shoes. He could only hope to avoid disasters. Such as not allowing the war with Erth to begin again.

Vharhin rolled over in bed. Tryla was on her stomach, her hair in a corona about her. The color fascinated him. Hair on Vhrazhia was dark, black as night. Hers was the shade of wood and it was light too, softer. He ran his fingers through it. The action instantly stirred his cock. It was the most intimate thing between a man and woman, the surrendering of the female's hair.

He should not be doing that.

Only with intense meditation had he willed his cock back to sleep and he did not need it reawakening now.

"It's time to get up. We must get ready for dinner."

Tryla barely stirred. "I'm tired," she said, her voice a small feminine whine.

Vharhin frowned. "That is not an option, woman. The emperor will not be kept waiting."

She cried out, lifting her head in reply to the smack of his hand on her ass.

"Ow, that hurt, you jerk!"

"More will follow if you do not get that pretty behind of yours out of bed."

She made a "harrumphing" noise as she rose from the mattress.

He could not resist a smirk, watching her lift her nose in the air.

"Go on, enjoy yourself. All I can say is you should have fucked me while you had the chance."

He raised a brow. "Do you think you will be any less naked in this bed tonight, any less tied down?"

She bit her lower lip, thinking out her reply. Did she believe him? Was she incensed or eager?

"I'm going to complain about you," she decided. "To someone."

"Like who? I am the son of the emperor."

"Your father, then. He'll listen."

Vharhin would like to hear that conversation. "You will tell him no such thing. You will be a polite, respectful female, speaking when spoken to. Together we will present a unified front, making it obvious how well we work together."

She made a face that he identified as Erth sarcasm. "Sure we do. I supply the body, you supply the torture."

"You did not seem to mind all the things I did."

"What choice did I have?"

"You have one now. Say the word and I'll release you."

"What's the catch?" she asked suspiciously.

"You must do so while in my arms."

She rolled her eyes. "Figures. Typical Vhrazhian trick."

"Are you saying you cannot resist me?"

"No," she spat back. "I'm saying I trust you about as far as I can throw your muscle-bound ass. Now if you wouldn't mind pointing out the nearest sanitizing chamber?"

"We use natural water."

"Whatever. I'll sanitize myself in honey if it will buy me a moment's peace."

He folded his arms.

"Now what?" she demanded.

"Women do not 'sanitize themselves' as you put it. They have their bodies tended to."

She narrowed her gaze. "You're not tending to anything on me, buddy. I clean my own body, thank you."

"Not here you don't. A Vhrazhian female does not engage in such lewd behavior."

"What's lewd? I just want to sanitize myself, not masturbate."

"The touching of the female body is inherently a sexual act. It is the male's responsibility, as well as his prerogative."

Her brows raised in utter disbelief. "You're telling me Vhrazhians use showers as excuses to feel up women?"

"Your language is crude, but the principle is basically correct. Either I will tend to you or I will summon a servant."

"I choose a servant."

He drew back his lips, determined that no man would see her body, let alone touch it. "The offer is rescinded," he declared. "I will tend to you."

"What kind of crap is that?"

"No more talk, woman." He took her by the hand.

She resisted, feet dug in to the smoothly polished stone floor. The fact that she slid so easily only made her angrier.

He was grinning by the time he got her to the bathing chamber, adjacent to his bedroom. In addition to the toilet, there were basins along each wall. In the center was a round depression, slightly concave. There was a lip around the edge and draining holes at the bottom.

"You call this a sanitizing chamber?" she complained.

"I call it a bathing chamber because that is what it is," he said.

One hand around her waist to hold her steady, he swung her up and over the edge. Pulling the upright golden lever on the floor, he activated the water mechanism. Overhead a disk-shaped panel slid aside, revealing a simple, perforated metal sheet above which was a pool of water.

The water drained through the small openings, creating the effect of rain, a hundred years' rain in the desert.

"Hands behind your back," he ordered his shapely, furious companion. "Do not move."

She looked poised to fight but he stared her down.

Tryla obeyed in the end, though she did so with disdain, throwing her hands together and pushing out her breasts, as if in open challenge. She looked incredibly fetching, her wet hair clinging to her neck and back, her eyes alive with energy and resistance.

If only she knew what a challenge it was to not put more than his hands on her. He could easily possess her, carry her nude body to the bed, have his way with her.

And indeed he would, all in good time.

Bath time proved to be yet another nightmare. Tryla was helpless, wet, enraged, indignant and frustrated as hell. This man was made of iron and she didn't just mean that cock of his.

What more did he want from her? He had worn her down, reduced her to a pathetic, stereotypical female in heat. Her body was his to enjoy and fuck the consequences.

But that wasn't good enough, no, he had to maintain whatever stupid principles he had. Stars, did he believe half of this stuff? Super-power sex hormones that would make her his slave? Bonding through intense non-sex sex all night long?

Had she really worked with him as a partner and then shared his bed to boot? She must be more in need of a vacation than she had realized.

It would be a joke if her pussy wasn't suffering through it all.

"I swear," she threatened, "if you make this last one moment longer than it has to..."

He lathered his hands and put them on her breasts. "Do you want to be clean or not?"

"I want to go home, that's what I want."

"Assassins are waiting for you there."

"Good. I'll die quickly instead of through slow torture."

Her nipples peaked. It felt very unnecessary, very unfair.

"Hold still," he ordered.

She was on tiptoes. "I will if you will stop playing with my breasts!"

"This isn't a game. The ambassador's brother, Lord Fhirvhi, might well attempt to have us killed. For that matter, it is in the power of my father to execute any persons who displease him, even me."

"So why couldn't I have stayed home to die?" she demanded.

He gave her nipple a tweak. "Must you have a sarcastic answer for everything?"

"Try saying something that makes sense and I will stop. For that matter, do something that makes sense. You half rescue me, you half fuck me, you half-ass brief me."

He spun her about for a quick pinch on the ass.

"Fucking prick!" she protested.

"Keep it up, Erthwoman. There are other tortures. I know a thousand and one ways to tease and taunt a woman."

"Just keep prattling, that's bad enough."

He pushed the soap down strategically, managing to graze her clitoris.

"Vharhin, no..."

"Open," he ordered even as she tried to clamp her legs tightly together.

She whimpered in exasperation, spreading for him.

"Be thankful I am doing things halfway," he told her, lightly stroking with the soap, moving it gradually deeper. "If I did things fully, there would be nothing left of your will."

Vharhin pressed the soap between her pussy lips.

She tried to resist moving against the smooth surface—dark red, like candle wax. The last thing she needed to do now was show her uncontrollable desire for his touch, his domination.

"You know what I need, you bastard."

"I want to hear you say it."

She pressed lewdly, trying for deeper penetration but he controlled the depth, like he did every other thing in her life. "I need to come," she cried out. "I need...relief."

"No, Tryla, you can't. You must learn to match your desires to mine, to yield to my control."

He took the soap away.

She rubbed her body against him in vain—slick and soapy, flesh to flesh, against his hard abdomen, his wonderful pectorals, his scrumptious cock and full balls. "You have no right. My body is my own."

"You are on my world now. Under my protection. That gives me the right."

"Stop being so stubborn," she whispered. "Stick your cock deep inside me, fuck me hard, see how good we can be together."

"That isn't going to happen, Tryla."

"I hate you!"

"I'm sorry. I am," he croaked.

She grabbed his cock, clutching it tightly in her greedy fingers. "Don't be sorry, be a man."

"You think I don't want to, more than anything in the world?"

"Then show me." She slid her hand up and down, winning a groan from the back of his throat.

"I know this turns you on," she said throatily, trying to turn his own weapons against him. "All I can think about is you and your body. You've done things no one else ever has—at least that I remember. You tied me up, you order me around and use me like a sex doll. You want me on my knees? I'll suck you like a good girl. I'll do anything."

Vharhin's eyes flashed hotter than his planet's sun. "You're a demoness," he accused.

You haven't seen anything yet, she thought.

"Put it in me," she panted, kissing his chest, rubbing her body against him as she continued her caressing.

She paid careful attention to the veins on the outside of his cock, three in all.

Something familiar there, too. This cock was not unknown to her. She had pleased it before. In an air car. He had wanted her to touch him then, to taste him, too. He had been almost desperate.

What sense did that make?

Time to take the situation into her own hands.

Tryla lifted up and put her arms around his neck as she pushed her pelvis against his crotch and impaled her pussy. His cock slid inside her to the hilt. She groaned, clenching his hot, hard shaft. There was more than one way to get the job done. Let him hold try to hold back now.

He grasped her by the waist, intending to separate them. She quickly moved her legs, locking her ankles. She buried her teeth into his shoulder for good measure. The water continued to pour, sluicing over their wet flesh, beading, splashing and filling her nostrils with an alien scent, slightly sweet.

Applying years of complex athletic training, including hours a week in the gel, she began to fuck him, flexing her buttocks, undulating her hips, pulling back, exposing his cock halfway then sheathing it again inside her tempting heat.

It would be nothing for a man of his strength to dislodge her but she counted on him not wanting to. Strong as his will was, surely he was capable of surrendering to desire?

"Don't be afraid," she gasped. "I won't break and I won't become your zombie slave like a Vhrazhian woman. Just fuck me, let me be me."

"You don't understand," he growled. "You are playing with fire."

The line sounded familiar. Had they had this conversation before?

"So burn me, melt me."

His cock swelled in reply. She was getting to him at long last.

The old saying came to mind, though, be careful what you wish for. Another product of her useless research.

How is it she could remember all of that stuff and nothing at all about this Vhrazhian who had supposedly rocked her world back on Erth?

Vharhin's body tensed, his muscles surging with all his hidden strength. His muscled stomach pressed to hers. His cock found the back of her vaginal canal. She could sense the war waging within him.

"Why do you try me like this?" he rasped. "I act for your good and mine. Vhrazhian cum is strong, it can brand a female."

"I can handle it."

"Not as you are. You will end up becoming someone you are not."

"I don't give a fuck. I'm only half a person now. I've felt that way my whole life. Someone has always had a piece of me. You, ErthSec and before that my family, whoever they were."

"And you think it will all be solved by my ejaculating inside you?" He tried to make it sound foolish, but she took it at face value.

"Yes, please," she urged. "Come inside me. Complete me, make me someone. I don't care who."

He nearly did come, his entire body quivering, and primed, teeth clenched. He leaned his head back.

At the last second he released a roar from deep in his throat, a cry of need and want...and frustration.

She sensed the veil of duty, the smothering cloak of responsibility descending. "No, this cannot be."

Vharhin wrenched them apart. Just in time for his cum to shoot into the air, splattering against her belly. Tryla whimpered in utter exasperation. She had been left in the lurch, again. Alone in her body's heat...*again*.

She could just cry. But what was the point?

Vharhin set her down. "I must finish bathing you."

He was going to touch her, now? Was he out of his alien mind?

"Vharhin, for pity's sake," she pleaded.

"It must be done," he said.

His hands on her body were cool, reproving — sheer torture.

How much of this was she supposed to stand? She would beg. Was that what it would take?

Adding to her misery, he made her stand there while he washed his own body, soaping his magnificent muscles, moving with the power and grace of a jungle cat. His cock was still hard. He was clearly ready for more. This was her fault.

Vharhin turned off the water and took her arm. He escorted her to the wall, pulling a towel from the rack. "Hands above your head."

She obeyed, lifting them high.

Unbidden, she spread her legs.

This desire to please him, to make up for her error in his eyes was maddening. An Erthwoman, an agent, should not be so dependent...so sexual.

He dried her thoroughly. He made it a clinical operation, deliberately non-sexual, though she whimpered nonetheless.

He could not stanch the flow of her warm fluids, thick and fragrant from between her thighs. Was there a limit to how much a single body could produce? Could a female's life be drained away in frustrated pleasure?

One way or the other, she was going to end up as the test case.

* * * * *

Vhrakhar was an older version of his son. Tryla was struck immediately by the resemblance, the proud jaw, the cheekbones, the deeply penetrating eyes, the hair tightly bound into a single cord down his back. The differences lay in the hue, the Shodan possessing silver highlights. He had slight lines on the edges of his eyes and a slight wrinkle to his brow, though they only served to add character.

His broad shoulders and muscular physique were well displayed in a tight gold tunic with black brocade. He wore black boots and breeches, similar to riding pants.

"Agent Tryla Numidia." The Shodan pressed his heels together and bowed. Tryla's hand was lost in the warmth and strength of his. Another characteristic he shared with his son. "Our House is honored."

"The honor is mine," she replied, being careful neither to avert her gaze nor stare blatantly.

Vharhin had spent much time preparing her for this greeting. Most of the explanations on etiquette had gone over her head. Apparently Vhrazhian men made a fetish of bowing—whole wars had been fought over perceived slights in ancient times—but the women were not expected to incline their heads in any way.

This was a symbol of their exalted place, though it seemed to Tryla like a sop designed to cover blatant inequality.

"May I present to you my sahvria, the Shodana Liantrisa."

The Shodan's mate was unmistakably beautiful even beneath her light golden veil. Her almond-shaped eyes shown through with unparalleled clarity. Tryla thought she saw something of her son in the measured slip of a smile.

"My husband's House welcomes you," she said, her voice lovely as a desert in bloom.

It's your House too, Tryla wanted to scream. "I am so pleased to be here," she said. "I have really looked forward to meeting you both." *So I could see what sort of genetics could result in a tyrant like Vharhin.*

Tryla couldn't stand the dress she had been made to wear. She hated formal clothing, especially of the feminine sort. The way Vharhin kept looking at her didn't help either. He looked like a cross between a ravenous wolf and a disapproving instructor.

"Don't get used to this," she had told him pointedly as they were getting ready. "I'm not doing this again."

"Of course not," he had agreed.

"You're lying," she had snapped. "I can see your eyebrows move."

"Vhrazhians don't lie."

"Yeah, well, you picked up some bad habits on Erth, then," she had said, struggling with the pins she was supposed to use to keep up her hair. "These are stupid."

She had tossed them across the room.

Vharhin had retrieved them and done the job himself. She had regretted not doing the job herself. Having his hands weave through her dark tresses, his strong body so close behind her had been too much to bear. She had nearly ended up begging to lean against him, better still to kiss and touch him all over.

"The Shahr Shodan tells me your performance in your planet's intelligence service has been exemplary," said Vhrakhar. "You possess a fine mind for intelligence."

Tryla had to think for a moment. He was referring to his own son. Strange he wasn't using Vharhin's name. "Obviously Vharhin does, too," she added, not sure what else to say.

Vhrakhar pinched his lips slightly. Tryla had seen the same expression of annoyance on Vharhin's face a number of times already. Was she committing a faux pas with the name thing or was this a more personal matter, father to son?

"Agent, would you grace us with your presence as we dine?" the Shodana asked, extending a graceful hand as she indicated the sumptuous feast behind them.

Tryla was duly impressed. There was a wide array of food, consisting of colorful fruit in glazed bowls, trays of carved meat and highly decorated pastries. What surprised her most was the way everything had been arranged on a low platform.

Rich, velvety pillows surrounded the platform. Most were red, with a few gold thrown in.

The dining hall itself was shaped like an inverted bowl, with the walls curving upward to a small aperture above which the stars could be seen. The walls were painted gold, decorated with silver reliefs portraying the exploits of knights, male Vhrashians in armor riding long lizard-like creatures, which she had learned were called mirkyas. Perhaps those males were ancient Shodans or their sons.

"It is I who would receive grace," replied Tryla, hoping she had remembered correctly the protocol Vharhin had taught her.

According to Vharhin she would be treated to a highly simplified version of Vhrashian High Court ritual tonight, in recognition of her alien status. She could hardly imagine getting the full treatment.

On the way to the table, the Shodana's fingers brushed Tryla's arm. "Thank you," she whispered. "For helping my son."

Tryla mulled over the compliment as Vharhin instructed her where to sit. He looked very handsome in a tunic of silver with a red crest of a mirkya. He wore no crown but neither did his father. At his waist, each man wore a small dagger of black metal encrusted with jewels.

Some symbol of the Empire, she assumed.

Like everything else Vhrashian, it was arcane, at once useful and useless, beautiful and dangerous.

They waited until the Shodan was seated. He sat upon the highest cushion, the Shodana beside him, her legs tucked underneath. It was an exceedingly awkward position, especially in her long green dress, tight about the waist, long-sleeved, descending all the way to her ankles.

Tryla's dress was red.

There was a whole thing about the colors, too, specific meanings and messages conveyed.

Whatever. She was hungry. Vharhin had not fed her all day. What with his sexual antics and then his insane alien etiquette lessons.

Tryla had no veil on.

That was because she was a foreigner. Whether that was an honor or an insult she had no clue. Vharhin's explanation seemed to leave both possibilities open.

Speaking of awkward positions, Tryla wasn't doing very well next to Vharhin. If only she could cross her legs she would be a lot more comfortable.

"Quit fidgeting," he whispered fiercely, for her ears only.

"I can't help it," she replied.

"Are you not comfortable?" asked the Shodan.

"No, I am fine." It seemed like she should call him something but according to Vharhin's explanation, he was too exalted for any title of address that might come from human lips.

She really needed to get off this planet.

The Shodan turned to the Shodana, rattling off something in Vhrazhian.

She rose promptly, bringing her pillow to Tryla. "Please, may I offer you mine?"

"No, I'm all right," Tryla said.

"But you must," said the Shodana.

Tryla looked at Vharhin who was stone-faced.

"Thank you," Tryla mumbled, accepting.

The Shodana took another, smaller pillow and returned to her mate.

"Much better," said the Shodan.

Tryla's temper flared. "No, it isn't, you shouldn't have given me hers. I didn't ask for it."

"Tryla!" Vharhin was mortified.

Vhrakhar spoke to his son, silencing him. Vharhin's features clouded, became unreadable.

"Your reflection honors our House, Agent," said Vhrakhar. "As it affords us opportunity to offer the hospitality of our wisdom and to receive the gift of correction."

Tryla shifted, squirming. There wasn't a trace of condemnation or sarcasm in his voice. He didn't need it, not with umpteen zillion centuries of tradition behind him. "You needn't explain yourself. I'm a foreigner, I should not be judging."

"You spoke from the heart, Agent, and that is valued on Vhrazhia. You think we have nothing to learn? I tell you, a creature that ceases to adapt perishes, so too a race, no matter how noble. The Shodana offered her pillow because the guest comes first. She did so at my instruction because it is my place to be the voice of hospitality."

Tryla decided to test him. "And what if I wanted your pillow?"

Vharhin sighed.

Vhrakhar leaned back, laughing. "Bravo! You see, I knew that you would bring us something to challenge us."

He rose to his feet, to the astonishment of his wife and son. "Agent, may I offer you my pillow?"

"No," said Tryla. "I'm good."

She could only imagine the sort of soap operas this species must watch, if indeed they watched any.

"Shodan," said Vharhin. "Is this necessary?"

Vhrakhar spoke to the Shodana, who in turn spoke to her son.

"The sweetmeats are fresh tonight," she said, whatever the hell that meant.

Vharhin frowned.

Tryla couldn't stand it. "Sir, I think I am causing a lot of difficulty," she said to the Shodan. "I certainly didn't intend it. In fact, I had not planned on coming to your planet at all."

She might have added that, up until recently, she had despised every living soul on it but that would not be good etiquette, she was quite sure.

"Agent," said Vhrakhar, ignoring her weak attempt to excuse herself. "The Shahr Shodan informs me that you lost family during the war. May I offer you the mourning bonds of my House?"

"Thank you," she said, having no clue what it meant to accept such a thing. "But it's not really something I share."

She looked pointedly at Vharhin who scowled. He had asked for this, not her.

"A wound hidden is a wound multiplied," said Vhrakhar. "My House, too, suffered, as many sons lost as there are stars to count. All of the Empire, you see, is my House."

"My people suffered the same losses," she said. "Maybe more."

"Agent," he said, his handsome features deep in contemplation. "I must ask you a sensitive question. If given the opportunity, right now, would you kill me?"

Talk about putting a damper on dinnertime conversation.

"That depends," she said bluntly. "Are you asking me as an Erth agent or a human being?"

"Both."

"As an agent I would not kill you unless ordered to do so. As a human being..." she hesitated.

"Yes?"

"As a human being, I would weigh my options. Would your successor be worse than you are, would a war result, would the evil outweigh the good?"

He laughed again, deep and rich like Vharhin. "I assume you take my death to be the good. But you are right, consequences would follow. You have met my successor. Would he be worse, do you think, than me?"

"Yes," said Tryla.

Vhrakhar roared. "I like you better and better, Agent Tryla Numidia. Where were you when I was in my mating time?"

The Shodana did not react.

"Playing tag with my Erth friends, most likely," she said. "Waiting for your death ships to come and blow my world apart."

No one spoke.

"Vharhin, Liantrisa," said the Shodan. "Leave us."

Wow. He had used their names. That couldn't be good.

Vharhin glared at Tryla as he stood. The look needed no translation.

"Agent," said Vhrakhar when they were alone. "You know little of who I am and I know nothing of you. I am aware of what you and my son accomplished on Erth. The information he brought back to me is allowing me to cleanse my own House. There is no way to value what you have done, except by offering the gift of utter honesty. I anticipate difficulties for my son. He has shown a restlessness born of this new age. He likes change for its own sake. He eschews the traditional ways. How is he to sit upon my throne? How will he govern a House ancient as the winds?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"You do know," said Vhrakhar. "It is as plain as the image in a mirror."

"I'm sorry, it isn't plain to me."

Vhrakhar reached for a purple fruit that was round like a grape but with two heads. "Please, have something."

She plucked a strawberry from a bowl. At least she had thought it was a strawberry until she saw it up close. She tried not to make a face as she swallowed it, legs and all.

"My son has made use of your body," said Vhrakhar.

Tryla nearly coughed up the strawberry-colored insect. "Sir?"

"Don't call me, Sir. It's inappropriate," he said. "Try the halish on the silver tray, it's very sweet."

She broke off a piece of dry, flat cake. It tasted like almonds and cinnamon. Not bad.

Chewing, she let the shock wear off.

"Is the euphemism not correct in Erth terms?" he asked. "I refer to intercourse."

"I know what you are referring to and with all due respect, I don't really know if I should discuss this with you."

"You must," said Vhrakhar. "I am Father of the House. Besides, do you think it is not obvious to me, how you two walk together, the looks you give each other? You have supped with one another—that is a Vhrazhian euphemism, by the way."

"All right, so we've supped once or twice," she admitted. "But that's in the past."

"Why in the past?"

"He won't...sup...anymore. He says he will get too attached. I don't really follow it all. It got weird after he told my chief and the others that he was taking me as a mate."

Vhrakhar nodded. "He refers to the mating fever caused by the male pheromones. It affects male and female alike. It addicts them to one another, assuring them as a breeding pair."

"Whatever it does, it freaks me out, pardon the expression. I wish he had left well enough alone. I wish he had left *me* well enough alone."

He studied her with those same penetrating eyes as Vharhin's. The feeling here wasn't sexual but it was just as discomfiting. "Do you really wish that, Agent, or do you speak as Erthers often do, in opposites?"

Opposites...like night and day, love and hate.

There was no way she could be bound to someone like Vharhin. She loved her freedom, he wanted her tied down. She had her career on Erth, he had this palace of a thousand wonders—tall as a redwood tree, with spires and domes, a hundred glistening colors like gems in the desert sun, miles of verdant gardens surrounding it, an oasis of indescribable beauty.

"No, I mean it as I say it. We really don't get along as a couple."

"I see." Vhrakhar drank from a gold jewel-encrusted cup.

She waited with bated breath. He certainly had a flair for drama.

"I have a problem, Agent, and only you can help me."

"I will do what I can."

"The laws and rites of Vhrazhian mating mean nothing to you but they are everything to us. I cannot say why my son did what he did but he chose you, he made this as his declaration. Certainly, I see reasons. You are a woman unparalleled. You truly do honor this House. Does he love you? Do you love him? These things I cannot know. But I must solve the riddle. You are here and you are a part of this House. Now how will you fit in?"

The mention of love by Vharhin's father made her head swim.

"My impression was that I was here for the mission," she said.

"No, Agent, that is not the case," he said. "My son thinks that is so, he sought to convince himself and also me but his reasons are personal. His passions frequently blind him. It never occurred to him that I would be conducting my own investigation parallel to his. Fhirvhi's plotting has been known to me for some time. I only awaited the unmasking of his supporters on Erth, which you have done for me."

Tryla frowned. "Your son and I did that together."

The fact that she had no memory of their work was something she would keep to herself for the moment.

He smiled indulgently. "The female in you longs to defend the male. That is commendable. At any rate, the so-called mission here was completed before it began. Were this only a matter of politics, you would be free to return to Erth as soon as possible."

"Are you saying I am not free?"

He took another sip from the goblet. "It is not I who holds you."

"You think Vharhin holds me?" She felt the anger rise. "Because he doesn't. I come and go as I please."

"And what of your heart? You might be an Erthwoman but you're a woman. The feminine heart is the home of all living things, Agent. Look around you. This is my House but the Shodana is its soul."

"With all due respect, you treat her more like a servant."

"We are all servants. The question is whom do we serve."

"I serve Erth," she said. "And I want to go home."

He offered no reply.

He didn't have to. He was the Shodan.

* * * * *

Vharhin paced the antechamber like a caged tiger.

"My son," said the Shodana. "Will you not come and sit with me?"

"No, Mother, I must think."

The Shodana sighed.

Vharhin threw his hands up in the direction of the curved golden doors, those which led into the dining chamber. "They have been in there forever. What could they be talking about?"

"You know how your father is."

"No, I don't, Mother." Vharhin wheeled about, facing the beautiful, stately female seated on the pillow behind him. "He has barely spoken a word to me since I came of age."

"That is his way, my son."

"His way isn't good enough," said Vharhin with surprising force. "He won't communicate with me. Doesn't he see the dilemma I am in? What am I to do with the Erthwoman?"

"Her name is Tryla." The Shodana smiled behind her veil. "And I think you know perfectly well what to do with her."

"I need to send her home," he said firmly.

"You need to treasure her," his mother countered. "And honor her as your mate."

"You don't understand the circumstances," he dismissed. "I was on an alien world—it was a matter of life and death."

"Do you not love her?"

Vharhin frowned, taken aback. "The Shahar Shodan loves his House, not a particular person."

"Your father loves me."

"He has strange ways of showing it."

"Your father gives me what I need. I still tremble at the sound of his voice. His every gesture makes me smile, he can weaken my knees with a gesture. He is my lord."

"I do not need to hear this, Mother."

"But you do and you shall."

"Do not command me," he said proudly. "I am not a child."

The Shodana went to her knees. "No, my son, you are a man. And I plead with you to listen to the words of a mere female."

Her pose irritated him. All his life he had taken female subservience for granted but Tryla was making him question everything. "Do not kneel, Mother, it's unseemly."

"I kneel in the pride of my position," she said unabashedly. "And here I will remain until you agree to examine your heart. You love the Erthwoman. It is on your face. She gladdens your heart and lightens your footsteps. You are not the same Vharhin who left us. You have grown and changed."

"It is the sum of my experiences from many years, come to fruition at once," he dismissed.

"It is one woman's love. Your woman."

His woman. Could such a thing be possible? He clenched his fists. "Mother, why are you torturing me? Tryla couldn't be the Shodana, this won't ever lead anywhere."

"It leads to love, my son. I have seen it in you and I can't give you back to unhappiness. Too many of our people suffer in their pride and discipline. Your father suffers as he struggles to stay alive under all that weight. I worry for you so much, Vharhin, you are such a spirited man, so full of life. I don't want the throne to be your death. Tryla could save you. She is the gift of this universe to you."

"I am sorry, Mother. I will hear no more and that is final." Vharhin straightened, resolved. She could kneel forever for all he cared.

"What is this, woman?" demanded the Shodan, emerging through the golden doors, Tryla by his side.

The Shodana bowed her head. "My lord," she said, acknowledging his displeasure.

"Has the Shahar Shodan upset you?" he asked.

"I have done nothing," said Vharhin to his father. "Nor has my mother."

"I will be the judge of that, Vharhin."

"The discussion between my mother and I was private," Vharhin said flatly.

Vhrakhar's eyes flashed. "She was my mate before she was your mother."

"In that case," Vharhin said. "You should have learned to take better care of her."

Tryla grabbed Vharhin's arm. "We should go."

Vhrakhar's face was hard as stone. Vharhin matched his stare. Myriad strange emotions, deep and primal, coursed through his veins as he confronted his father, this older version of himself, whom he barely knew.

"You should listen to your mate, Vharhin," said Vhrakhar. "She possesses far greater equilibrium than you do."

Vharhin seethed. He took Tryla's hand.

It was only once they were halfway down the hall that he realized he had been pulling her.

He let go.

She was angry. "I was trying to help you back there, you big oaf."

"Seems like you were on his side," Vharhin shot back.

"I wasn't aware we were picking sides," she said. "Thanks for the heads-up."

She marched down the hall alone, her posterior swaying in a manner most provocative. "Incidentally," she said over her shoulder, "I am choosing my own side."

He followed her, not dignifying her comment with a reply. She had already decimated his pride. When she slammed the door to his own bedchamber in his face, however, locking him out, that was more than he could bear.

"Open up," he demanded. "Or I will kick the door down."

"Knock yourself out," she cried. "You're the one footing the repair bills in this place."

Vharhin frowned, backing up. She had asked for this.

Chapter Fifteen

The door crashed inward. Tryla resisted the impulse to retreat and lock herself in the bathing chamber. She would meet this bully head-on.

"Come and get me," she dared, lowering her body into a fighting stance.

Vharhin was breathing hard, eyes wild, fists clenched. "You cannot fight in a dress."

She kicked off her silver slippers. "Wanna bet?"

"I don't want to hurt you, Tryla."

"That makes one of us." She lunged at him, ready to take him down.

He dodged her kick and grabbed her around the waist.

"Let go of me," she cried as he lifted her off her feet, her back to his front.

"Settle down and I will."

"Okay, you win."

She went slack and he released her.

It was a trick. She turned on him at once, grabbing his testicles. "Never trust an Erthwoman," she counseled, squeezing his balls to her great delight.

Vharhin's countermove was unexpected, some kind of alien martial arts, she guessed. Sweeping her legs out from under her, he brought her down onto her stomach. His knee pressed her back, immobilizing her.

"No more games," he said.

"You're hurting me." She squirmed, sounding way too much like a female for her own liking.

"I am not hurting you," he said. "I am attempting to direct your behavior and I will continue to do so until I am pleased with your obedience."

The word obedience set off alarm bells, even as it touched on something primal—a deep and secret need to submit to a power greater than herself.

She and Vharhin had been down this road one time too many. For once she was going to keep him from seducing her.

"Why do you even care what I do?" she said. "You are too scared to make love to me anymore."

He brought her to her feet, face-to-face. His smile was slanted, pure Vhrazhian bad boy. "Do I look scared to you?"

Tryla's stomach roiled, as if a hot knife had just slipped in edge-wise.

He had called her bluff. Her voice was barely audible. "You mean..."

"I mean what I said, woman. Either obey me or face my displeasure."

Vharhin released her. They stood face-to-face. His arms were folded proudly across his chest. His cock strained at the fabric of his tight pants.

He had commanded her.

Her cheeks flushed under his gaze.

"I can fight you, Vharhin...for a long time."

"You can, but you won't. Instead you will undo your hair and remove your dress for me."

"You had a chance with me when you were bathing me," she reminded. "You didn't want it."

Vharhin's features were imperious. "I have no desire to have my commands analyzed, woman."

"And I have no desire to be commanded."

"You wanted it before," he reminded.

"I changed my mind."

"That is irrelevant," he declared. "My wishes reign supreme."

"So I have to strip and submit whenever you want but if I want any action when you're not in the mood, I'm out of luck?"

"You catch on quickly for an Erth girl."

"I know what this is about."

"I can hardly wait to hear," he said dryly.

"You are trying to get back at your father. He has managed to charm me and you want to make it clear that you call the shots where I'm concerned. It's like some kind of royal pissing match."

Vharhin's lips pulled back, straight and tight, against his teeth.

"You're mad now, aren't you," she declared with satisfaction.

"Not in the least."

"I know your expressions."

"And I know yours. More than anything, at this moment, you want me to stop you from talking."

"That's a lie."

Vharhin moved in and took her lips. The kiss was hard, demanding. He took her as a man takes a woman he is about to dominate.

Correction, a woman he was already dominating.

Tryla melted against him, giving access to his tongue. He plundered her hot mouth, letting her know who was boss, at least in the bedroom.

Her eyes slid closed. She slid her hands to his powerful arms, wanting to feel his biceps. His cock was rock-hard. She would take it...exactly as he wished.

Panting, clinging, she sought to grasp his cock.

He pushed her away.

"Let down your hair and take off your dress."

Tryla was in a dream. She felt her hands and arms lift to remove the pins from her hair. It was happening – she was doing his bidding, obeying. How far would it go?

She slipped out the pins allowing her hair to fall, thick and seductive about her shoulders.

Tryla saw the desire in his eyes. He was pleased with what he saw.

The fact increased her arousal, making her pussy dripping-wet.

"My parents think very highly of you."

"Really?"

How could he tell?

"My father spent more time talking to you tonight than with any of his ministers of the past ten years. Probably Mother too."

"I like him," she rasped, unhooking the clasps on her dress. "He's a good man and he loves you."

Vharhin shook his head. "I doubt that."

"He does," she insisted. "I know people – I'm a detective, remember?"

"He's not a person, he's an alien."

"So are you and I know you."

He smiled slyly. "Then you know what I plan to do to you tonight?"

Tryla shivered. "No," she admitted. "But I can imagine, after that kiss."

The dress slid down over her waist, pooling at her bare feet. She stepped from it, leaving herself clothed only in a thin, white chemise. The garment was antiquated by Erth standards, representative of a time when females were far more sensual and subservient.

Let the Vhrazhian women wear uniforms with pants, she decided and you would see a revolution in no time.

"Don't look at me like that," she said.

His expression bordered on a smirk. "How am I looking at you?"

"Like I'm a menu item." Her lips felt swollen. Her cheeks were red-hot.

He reached out and touched her dark curls, running his finger through the silky ringlets. "Aren't you?"

Her breath quickened. She could feel her nipples tenting the chemise. This would be so much easier if he were as undressed as she.

Being nearly naked before a fully clothed Vharhin made her feel twice as open, twice as vulnerable.

"Your father knows," she confessed.

"Knows what?"

"That you have had your way with me."

"You told him?"

"Of course not. He guessed." She moved to lift the chemise over her head.

"No." He stopped her.

She returned her arms to her sides. He approached, so their chests were nearly touching. "There is a practice that is sometimes done at the consummation of a mating. The sahvril rips his mate's most intimate covering. It symbolizes his power, his lust and her surrender."

"I'm sure you hate that custom," she teased.

His hands moved to her neckline. For an excruciating instant, he delayed. "I do not know where this will lead. By morning, we will both be different."

"I'm not afraid."

"Perhaps you should be. We do not know how your biology will react to prolonged interaction with mine."

"There's only one way to find out."

Indeed, there was no way back.

"I will come inside you many times, Tryla." He stroked her hair. "I will love you madly and I will make you scream. I will overwhelm your body and mind. Are you ready?"

Taking a deep breath, she said the first words that came into her mind. Maybe not the most romantic but pretty descriptive nonetheless.

"I was born ready, Sherlock."

Vharhin shredded the chemise, baring her. Her head swam. She was naked, feeling more exposed than she ever had in her life.

Vharhin savored the moment, not wanting it to end.

Tryla, naked before him in raw anticipation, looked up to him with her devastating Erth eyes.

Reaching out, he touched her. She sucked in her breath in anticipation.

"Oh," she sighed. "Oh, Vharhin..."

Vharhin softly cupped the exquisite globe. She shivered just like a Vhrazhian woman. But there was all the difference in the world. There was no ancient script here, no telling where this would lead. Tryla was behaving but talking back in a way no female of his own world could.

Their women knew no other reality besides submission, but this one could say no, she could walk away and never look back. Would he be able to conquer her in the same way?

Vharhin touched her head, her soft hair running through his fingers. "You are wet." He noted her scent in the air.

"Yes."

"Shall I treat you as one of our own women?" he mused.

"Yes, I don't want you to hold back," she said, her conviction fierce and challenging.

He enjoyed her trembling, the deep arousal.

One by one, he flicked her nipples.

She slid her eyes closed, whimpering.

"Look at me," he commanded.

Tryla swooned.

"What do you see in my eyes?"

"My conquest."

His hand went to the juncture of her thighs. "Open."

She parted her legs obediently. He touched her, gauging her reaction. Her liquids trickled over his fingertips. She dared not breathe as he pressed his hand very, very slowly into her aching sex.

His motions were measured and expert, quickly making her pant, as heated and mindless as an animal.

Methodically, almost cruelly, he made her come. She stood there, submitting, stripped to the base of her sexual self. He reserved the role of spectator, manipulator.

Dripping with sweat, she went limp, spent.

He grasped hold of her hair in his fist bending back her neck. "A Vhrazhian owns his mate. It is a sacred bond. Do you understand?"

Her eyes said no, her body said yes.

"We are condemning ourselves to an unknown hell. You know that you and I, we will be at home on neither planet. You will no longer be the human female you were. You will be bound to me and I, for my part, will face the alienation of my people."

Tryla was beyond caring, beyond thinking. Her eyes showed her predicament. She was living touch to touch, stimulation to stimulation. Vharhin breathed deeply. His body hummed with life.

The pheromones were surely thick in his sweat, just as they would be in his cum. Tryla had seemed immune so far. Would that remain the case?

"Lick," he commanded, pointing to his chest. "Here."

Tryla applied her tongue, dutifully running it over his pectorals. He sighed as she reached his nipples, pleasuring them one by one.

He rewarded her by pressing his hand between her thighs. She was very wet, deeply aroused.

She pushed against his fingers, blatant, writhing.

Vharhin pushed her away.

She reached out, whimpering. He pushed again, testing. Would she be fully bound by his body chemistry this time, would she become his willing, lifelong slave? A part of him wanted this more than anything. Another part of him, the stronger part, wanted her to maintain her freedom, her right to choose.

Was it fair to restrict a woman so, to create in her something close to addiction, requiring her to seek out his sexual attentions? He had never before asked such a question.

Then again, he had never been with a human female before, let alone one as strong and fierce as Tryla.

Her eyes watered. She slowly writhed, displaying the intensity of her need.

He allowed her access to his chest again. She licked feverishly, alternating her ministrations with tiny, grateful kisses.

Vharhin put his glistening, wet fingers to her mouth, giving her a taste of her own arousal.

She applied suction, desperate, mindless.

"I could never grow tired of this," he said, as though she might still be capable of a rational discussion. "But I would always wonder if it was something you were doing out of your free will or the result of the pheromones."

She whimpered.

"Go to the bed," he said. "Show me how you walk."

Her instant obedience roused his Vhrazhian soul—and his cock too. There was no greater aphrodisiac than a woman under his power.

She moved beautifully, like a cat, her long hair swaying, her ass wriggling delightfully. He wanted her too much. How would he maintain his place of aloof Vhrazhian domination?

"On all fours, face the wall," he commanded.

Tryla took her position. She could not see what he was going to do next.

Slowly, enjoying his power over her, he undressed. Her breathing was painful. She could be thinking of nothing now but release.

Unfortunately for her, she was not going to be satisfied just yet.

She was breathing quickly, straining to hear him, desperate to know where he was.

At this moment he was the center of her universe.

She felt the same for him.

Moving in close he watched her for a bit. Did she know how close he was?

Suddenly he stroked her thigh, his touch blatant, almost insolent. "Spread," he ordered.

Tryla opened her knees wider, groaning with pleasure. He beheld her glistening slit. Extending a finger, he swathed her opening and took a small taste. His little Erth captive shuddered, pushing her hindquarters toward him for more.

"What is going to happen next is a demonstration," he said. "You will now learn what it is like to serve the pleasure of a Vhrazhian male. I will be climaxing, you will not. Think of that as I enjoy your pussy, Tryla...or should I say my pussy?"

Tryla moaned, her fingers digging into the cover. "Vharhin..."

He pinched her ass lightly, enjoying the feel of her firm buttocks between his fingers. "You have no permission to speak. Your moans and pants are quite sufficient for someone in your position."

She lifted her head. He was pushing her far, he could see in the way her body twitched, almost as if she were possessed. Giving no quarter, he played with her nipples.

Tryla sobbed with the imposed pleasure, the intolerable rising tension.

Millimeter by millimeter, his cock sank inside her, in its full glory. He would come inside her many times. The chemical would go to her bloodstream. She didn't stand a chance.

"Orgasm for me now, on my command," he declared. "Or I will bind you hand and foot and tickle you with nayrog feathers as punishment."

It was no idle threat. Vharhin was fully prepared, even eager. He imagined Tryla caught between laughter and tears, writhing in mindless ecstasy, completely overcome with sensations.

She fought to remain perfectly still, an obedient vessel. Vharhin's thrusts were measured, centered, decisively male. One hand rested on her back, the other at her waist.

"You are exquisite, Tryla. Thinking of you...of this, consumes me."

The confession caused her to turn her head. He leaned forward, bestowing the kiss she craved. Her lips were hot as a Vhrazhian volcano. She sighed in satisfaction, though he knew she would regret having the itch scratched.

Sure enough, her heat mounted, pushing her to the brink.

She was not going to be able to hold out.

He was going to have the pleasure of tickling her lovely body with those feathers after all.

"Careful," he said, reaching around for her breasts. "You are liable to break discipline. What will ErthSec say?"

Tryla whimpered as he reached around to play with her breasts. He did so skillfully, maddeningly. Her body dripped sweat.

He pulled his cock out halfway.

She groaned, thrusting backward wanting to keep him inside her.

Vharhin chided her. "Be still, woman."

She had to endure as he teased, his cock retracting, barely grazing her opening, only to plunge again.

She went down on her elbows, vanquished. The orgasm was overtaking her. She fought it, shivering.

He slammed home, completing her conquest.

Tryla screamed.

Vharhin held himself rigid as she convulsed underneath him, sweating, undone, overwhelmed.

When the last of the tremors passed he pushed her down onto her belly.

He took her hard and fast, shoving her into the bed again and again. She gasped and groaned, trying to catch up. She couldn't do it. He ejaculated inside her vanquished body.

"Have you ever had anal intercourse?"

"No," she said, her voice a sweet, soft prayer from another world.

"First time for everything, eh? Back up on your knees."

She complied instantly, resting her head on her folded arms. He kissed up and down her spine, melding his lips to her flesh, thinking of all their adventures, marveling that it had all led to this. What a joy to argue and conspire and sleep with the same woman, to laugh and yell, to discover the greatest mysteries and recapture timeless truth.

What if he were just an individual, a common citizen, would he run away with her? Would she want him?

He used her own copious fluids to lubricate the narrow canal. She made happy noises, purring sounds as he worked his fingers into her.

Vharhin intended to make her come this time as he ejaculated. And after that...the tickling.

Tryla felt like she had just consumed a quart of mir wine. Not that she was drunk exactly, just expansive, open, receptive. Needy. Vharhin was the focus of her world. His wants, his breathing, his hands on her, his cock and what he wanted to do to her next.

She was to be taken anally. He was readying her, widening the pathway, lubricating her with his finger, dipped in her sex fluids. She breathed in and out, filling her lungs with the air of their coupling, his scent and hers intermingled.

It was more than a little overpowering. So much was happening so fast. She had bonded with Vharhin, on Vhrazhia of all places. Meeting his parents, she understood so much more the pressure he was under. Vhrakhar constantly underestimating him, sending him on missions but not trusting him completely. His mother, scarcely able to breathe in the Shodan's presence without permission.

Vharhin had warned her about the power of a Vhrazhian male's pheromones upon his mate. He hadn't kidding, apparently.

A kind of addiction he'd called it.

She certainly felt addicted to his cock. She had to have it back inside her. She was hollow, split open, exposed without it. Blatantly, she wriggled her ass.

She earned herself a pinch.

The feeling was hot and wicked and invigorating. Had his fingers left marks on her?

Tryla fought to stay still even as he spread her cheeks with his hands, his fingers molding, gently, decisively pressing. His cock was at her opening, the head of it poised.

He allowed the seconds to pass.

"On Vhrazhia," he said. "This may not be done with a concubine. The act is too submissive, too intimate. It can only occur between a sahvral and a sahvria."

Tryla's heart beat wildly. Was he committing himself this far? Would they truly be bound together forever?

This was more than mere anal sex. This was the fusing of souls.

His cock pushed into her, very, very slowly. She felt the heat, a sudden searing touch of energy pulsing with the energy of an alien race, an alien world.

"I have wanted this," he confessed. "From the beginning I have imagined it."

"I wanted to be taken," she said. "I wanted to see where it would all go."

Vharhin moved deeper inside her, giving her time to accommodate him. "Relax...yes," he praised. "Good."

His voice was magic, it triggered compliance, trust.

Tryla soaked in the compliment. She wanted to be good for him and she wanted him to need her and her alone. She wanted him dependent on her lovemaking, like she felt on his.

"Yes, that's it, Tryla. You are so incredible." The sounds coming from his throat were universally masculine, music to her ears.

He surprised her by finding her clitoris with his finger. Her body leapt in reply, further impaling her.

Vharhin thrust deeper now, his breathing quicker. With every motion in and out she could feel his heat, his enjoyment.

Yes, yes, she was being used for his absolute pleasure.

She wanted him to enjoy every second, to feel the power he deserved. He had earned this right with her. He had earned it defending his planet and his people. His father might not see it but she could pay tribute with her body.

Whoever his real mate turned out to be she had better respect and love Vharhin or she would personally come and kick the woman's posterior soundly. Diplomatic incident or no.

"Tryla." He spoke her name with pride and satisfaction. She considered it an honor.

"Come inside me," she urged, risking whatever punishment for speaking. "Let me feel it."

"Yes, my sweet Tryla," he said, making sure to continue his stroking of her clitoris. She clutched him tightly, moving him along to the finish.

He tensed up, his cock swelled. She knew he was there.

"Permission to come?" she said.

"Yes," he confirmed.

They exploded together, her on his finger and him inside her narrow but slick canal. He exhaled with the satisfaction, his body releasing again and again. Precious seconds ticked by as he emitted his seed into her, spurt after hot spurt.

Finally, when he was exhausted, he lowered himself on top of her. Their fingers intertwined, his lips nuzzling her neck, their heartbeats finding a unique interplanetary harmony, his slower one framing her quicker one.

It was a magical sound. The ending of one shared reality, but also the beginning of another.

What did it all mean? She was too tired to figure it out. Maybe after a little rest, just the two of them together, sleeping.

Old-fashioned sleep.

That was it! They had slept together once before, in her personal chambers. He had indeed made love to her, utterly possessing her. Suddenly other memories came flooding back, from the first time she had seen him in the chief's office and nearly shot him.

"Vharhin," she exclaimed. "I remember."

He sat bolt upright, pulling her up with him. "You do?"

"Yes. You posed as a VISS officer, but you were terrible as an agent and you were so arrogant, I couldn't stand you from the start. You drove me absolutely crazy, every time I turned around you were making mistakes all the while trying to bully me with that Vhrazhian attitude of yours. Oh, stars, it's all so clear, you are arrogant and stubborn and domineering."

"Don't stop now," he said dryly. "You're on a roll."

"You're right, there's more," she said soberly. "You were utterly impossible, you never gave me a moment's peace and..."

"And?"

"And I'm pretty sure I loved you."

"How could you not, with all those good qualities?"

She giggled. "Kiss me, Sherlock."

Tryla was just about to receive her kiss when they heard the first of the explosions.

Vharhin pulled her close.

"What is it?" she asked. "What's happening?"

"I do not know."

The answer was provided by a man in the doorway. He was armed, wearing the livery of the Royal Guard. The note of alarm on his face indicated the severity of the situation.

"Your Highness," he declared, judiciously ignoring their nudity. "The palace is under attack."

Chapter Sixteen

Vharhin cursed his own stupidity. He should never have allowed his father to convince him to wait and do nothing. The plot was quite obviously far from being under control. In fact, they were now in the midst of some kind of coup attempt.

"Tryla, I want you to stay here." He pulled his clothes on as quickly as he could.

"Are you kidding me?" She was back in Erthwoman mode, all hints of submission gone. "You think I'm going to miss all the fun. Just give me a gun and stay out of my way."

"Tryla, that is an order," he said sternly.

She kissed his forehead. "You're sweet to worry about me but I'm a big girl, remember?"

He frowned heavily. "You are immune to my non-sexual commands as always."

"That surprises you?"

"Frankly, yes. At this point you should still be a little dazed from all the pheromones I pumped into you. They should have muted your independent streak a bit."

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever, Tarzan, just get me something to wear, will you? I can't fight in that silly dress."

He knew better than to ask who Tarzan might be. No doubt another of her historical Erth personalities. Far wiser to let the matter go and accept her help.

After all, he was certainly going to need it.

He went to the closet and pulled out the uniform she had worn earlier. "Much as I hate to see you in clothes..."

"You'll live." She dressed with lightning speed. "So, who do you think is behind this? Fhivhi?"

"That's a good guess."

"He'll try to get to your parents."

"I know." He handed her one of two silver energy pistols from a box on his dresser. "These are ceremonial but deadly nonetheless."

She weighed the weapon in her hands. It had nice balance, was light, easy to aim. She pulled the trigger, shooting a hole in his dresser with the tiny red beam. "Sweet."

"You'll pay for that later," he grumbled.

"More tickle time?" She winked.

"If we survive. Follow me. There is a secret back way to my parents' chambers."

They ran down the corridor, Vharhin in the lead. "It's here," he said stopping in front of a blank space in the wall. Vharhin pushed against it, causing a section to slide open.

"Very nice," she said noting with approval the dimly lit passageway behind the panel. "It would really come in handy for hide and go seek."

"Hide and what?"

"It's a game Erth kids used to play. Come on, we have an emperor and empress to rescue."

The passageway was long, with a number of snaking curves. Vharhin signaled her to silence as they neared another door panel at the end.

Placing his eye against a keyhole, he scoped the situation.

Tryla waited, impatient as hell.

Presently he cupped his hand over her ear and whispered his report. His voice was husky and his breath was hot.

Her knees went weak. She wanted him to fuck her right there.

Stupid pheromones!

Biting down on her lip, she got a grip on her libido.

"There are two of Fhirvhi's men in there. They have the Shodan and Shodana hostage," he told her.

She whispered back. "What do we do?"

He gave his answer, his cock brushing her hip accidentally in the process. "On my count, I'll open the door and we'll drop the boom."

She reached for him, nostrils flaring.

We will not be able to work together anymore, she decided.

He pushed her hand away, shaking his head.

She stifled a sigh. Motioning, she pulled him close. "I have a better idea. Let me go out first, I'll distract them."

He scowled.

"Trust me," she said fiercely, handing him her pistol.

He nodded reluctantly. "On three."

She winked, letting him know it would be okay.

He held up one finger, two fingers and finally three before pressing a button on the wall.

The panel slid back, leaving Vharhin in the shadows.

The two gunmen whirled, glaring at her.

Show time.

Tryla batted her eyelashes. "Hello, boys."

The Shodan and Shodana were sitting back to back on the floor, tied with rope, gags in their mouths. The two Vhrazhian gunmen pointed large, ominous weapons.

"Who are you?" demanded one of them.

Tryla tried not to be distracted by the large scar across his ugly face. "I'm with Erth Security," she declared.

They looked at each other, grinning. The second man had a flat nose, pushed noticeably to one side.

"This isn't Erth," said the man with the broken nose.

"And you're a female," said the first. "Which makes you good for only one thing."

Tryla played it up big. "And what would that be? Other than kicking your ass?"

"You? Kick my ass?" the scarred man laughed. "More likely you'll kiss it. Among other things."

"Come here," the flat nose beckoned. "Let's see if it's true what they say about Erthwomen."

Tryla's heart thumped in her chest. As long as the one man kept his gun on the Shodan and Shodana and the other kept his gun on her, Vharhin wasn't going to be able to save anyone.

"I will," she purred. "If you'll show me some of the things Vhrazhian men are famous for."

"Why not?" said the scar-faced man. "It's not like you are going to hurt us, right?"

"Oh, no, you're just too strong. I see that now."

"Take off your clothes," the flat nose ordered, completely taken in by her act.

"All right," she said, reaching for the zipper on her uniform.

The two Vhrazhians glared, licking their lips as she tugged the zipper down just a short distance to her breasts. She could imagine what this was doing to Vharhin's blood pressure. "Do you like what you see so far?" she teased.

"We'll tell you once we've actually seen something," said flat nose.

"You'll have to come and get it."

"You asked for it." Flat Nose was reaching toward her, while the scar-faced one stood there drooling. Both had lowered their weapons for the moment.

It was now or never, Tryla decided.

Immediately she delivered a chop to the solar plexus, doubling Flat Nose over. The scar-faced man prepared to drop her with the butt of his gun in retaliation, but Vharhin was right there to shoot him dead with a clean hit to the skull. Tryla finished off Flat Nose, quickly, painlessly, while Vharhin took the gag from his father's mouth.

"You saved my life," said Vhrakhar. "And that of your mother."

Vharhin showed no emotion. "It was my duty."

The Shodana found shelter in her husband's arms. "What are we to do?"

"The Shahar Shodan must see to our security," said Vhrakhar, a further nod to his son's abilities.

Vharhin stood tall. "We will use the passage and find our way to the transporter. We cannot take the chance of any of the three of you being captured."

"I am staying," said Tryla.

"No, you are not," said Vharhin.

"It would be wiser to go," the Shodan told her. "When in doubt, live to fight another day."

"That is what you have taught me," said Vharhin. "Among many other things."

"I am obviously a great teacher," said the Shodan, a slight twinkle in his eyes.

Tryla felt a lump in her throat. She sensed this moment had been a lifetime in coming between father and son. Too bad it had taken a harrowing experience to get there.

"We must move quickly," said Vharhin, ushering his mother to the secret passage. "More of our enemies may be on the way."

"Yes," said the Shodan, following. "Seven of them burst in initially. Five of them were called elsewhere. They seem to be meeting stiffer resistance than they had expected."

"Our Guard will fight to the death for the Shodan and Shodana," said Vharhin proudly.

"And for the Shahar Shodan," Vhrakhar added.

They did not go all the way back down the corridor to Vharhin's chambers. About midway down Vharhin felt for another panel in the wall. That one led down a fresh passageway, narrow and somewhat damp.

"This will take us to the transportation device," Vharhin told Tryla. "We can hope the enemy has not found it ahead of us."

The transportation room was deserted. This was a stroke of good luck. There was, however, another problem. The machine had only two tubes.

"The women will be transported first," said the Shodan.

"You should go with the Shodana," said Tryla to Vhrakhar.

Vhrakhar, smiled, overruling her. "The Shodana shall go...and also the future Shahara Shodana."

It took a moment for Tryla to realize he was referring to her.

Vharhin regarded his father with raised eyebrows. It was the closest look to surprise Tryla had yet seen on his face.

"Do not question me," said Vhrakhar to his son. "I am the Father of this House."

"Vharhin, I won't be separated from you," said Tryla.

"The decision is not yours or mine to make," said Vharhin. "You must go with the Shodana to protect her."

"Vhrakhar," said Tryla. "Won't you change your mind?"

"You should mind your mate," said Vhrakhar gently enough. "He has spoken to you."

Tryla's heart beat frantically as a million questions surfaced in her brain. None of this made sense. How could they be naming her crown princess and who was behind the attack and what if she never saw Vharhin again?

The men secured their mates, positioning them safely and giving them each a kiss to steady their nerves.

Tryla released a soft moan as Vharhin broke contact and slid the cylinder in place over her head. She pressed her palm to the clear surface. Vharhin touched the other side for a moment.

She tried to memorize every feature of his face, just in case. Tryla took a deep breath as the machine was activated.

In a matter of moments the tube was shrouded in utter blackness. She braced for the feeling of falling infinitely far and with it the dissolving into hot, exploding, melting particles.

Only this time she felt herself being yanked back from the abyss.

Something was wrong.

The lights came back on.

They were still in the palace.

Vharhin and Vhrakhar stood by, their hands in the air. A dozen armed men were guarding them, not nearly as stupid-looking as the other two.

A man in green robes was standing with them. His head was cleanly shaven. His lips were compressed tightly in a look of vicious delight. Like a weasel about to enjoy its prey.

Lord Fhirvhi, her every instinct screamed.

"So glad you could join us," he drawled as his men lifted the cylinders to free the two women. "It was really quite rude of you to attempt to leave, you know. We have so much planned in your honor."

"Fhirvhi," spoke the Shodan in a measured, menacing tone. "You hold momentary sway. But know that if you harm any of my family, the Shodana in particular, you will face a suffering such as has never been known amongst our people."

"Do you threaten me, Shodan?" the dark lord scoffed. "You choose an odd time."

"The truth has no limit in time or place."

"You will suffer the same from me if you harm Tryla," Vharhin added.

"Ah, yes, the Erth whore," Fhirvhi addressed Tryla directly. "Quite a lot of trouble you've caused."

"From what I hear, no one could ever be as much of a whore as you are," Tryla shot back. "Or a bigger traitor."

"Well spoken," he said. "You are brave at least, I will give you that."

"What are your intentions?" demanded the Shodan.

"My intentions?" Fhirvhi strode about the room. The two women were held in place away from their men, guns at their backs. "Why, I have come to rescue you, of course. Unfortunately, I have come too late. This Erth agent, bent on striking a mortal wound to the heart of the Empire, has already succeeded. Imagine my horror, discovering Agent Tryla, of Erth Security, no less, standing over the bodies of the Shodan and Shodana and of the heir as well.

"The entire dynasty, swept away in a single blow. I will have to act quickly, won't I, by taking this assassin into custody and informing the people of this dire tragedy. Naturally, I must also prepare our response. It will be difficult to restrain the wrath of the Empire's citizens. Military action will be desired. A new emperor will be needed."

"You will make yourself available," said Tryla. "*Naturally.*"

"It is the least I can do." He inclined his head. "I am, after all, a public servant."

"You are a monster," said the Shodana. "You are not fit to breathe Vhrazhian air."

Fhirvhi laughed. "Shodan, your mate needs to learn manners. Since when is the tongue of a woman exercised in the affairs of men?"

"She's right," said Tryla. "You aren't a man. And the Shodan is right too. You will suffer. I promise you."

"How can you be so sure?" Fhirvhi wondered.

"They used to call it karma on Erth...what you sow, you reap."

"This is not your Erth with its easy environment. On Vhrazhia, to reap at all is victory. But you wouldn't understand. Your world breeds water-logged sluggards."

"Your brain is more water-logged than anything."

"Fhirvhi," said Vharhin. "Spare the females. Save some modicum of honor for your family name."

Fhirvhi's eyes flared in hatred. "Don't lecture me on honor, whelp. I am not the one who brought an Erth whore to the palace as a mate. You shame our tradition. And your father is too weak to oppose you. The Sapphire Throne is corroded by your decay. I shall cleanse it."

"Your words are without balance," said the Shodan. "And without balance you are lost."

"No." He seized a pistol from one of his men. "It is you who are lost."

Fhirvhi took aim at the emperor. Everything happened at lightning-speed after that. Tryla didn't stop to think. She was an agent, trained to die for others. The Vhrazhian clearly did not expect her intervention, the lithe human body flying across the target at just the right moment. He was as shocked as anyone when the blast of the energy beam hit Tryla instead of the Shodan.

Tryla was aware of Vharhin crying out her name and lunging just after she did. He must have landed on top of her. So much pain, the beam draining a hole in her heart, the blood rushing out.

Her mind, only recently restored fully, collapsed backward, to before she met him, back through various missions. Drug dealers and slavers arrested, gangs broken up. Before that it had been the training...and before that...nothing.

She smiled up at him. He held her in his arms.

"I will love you, Vharhin, always."

"And I will love you." His voice sounded choked, not at all Vhrazhian.

"My sahvral..."

"My sahvria..."

The smile broadened...and she slipped away.

"It's over for you, Vharhin," Fhirvhi announced. "Submit or die."

Vharhin clenched his teeth. A low growl issued from his throat as he turned and his eyes glowed with the wildness of his pain. Fhirvhi stood no chance as Vharhin lunged at him, knocking away the weapon.

"No," said Vharhin, his hand encircling Fhirvhi's neck in a vise grip. "It is over for you."

Fhirvhi could not breathe. Choking, he gave the order to his men. "Drop...your weapons."

Vharhin waited until he heard the sound of them, falling on the stone floor.

Still using but one hand, he lifted Fhirvhi off his feet and threw him headlong against the wall.

He crumpled, unconscious. His men dropped quickly to their knees in submission.

Vharhin's fists were clenched. In his rage he wanted to kill them all.

"My son." It was his father's hand, upon his shoulder. "We must stay balanced."

Vharhin knew his father was right. For while he saw in the Shodan's eyes that he understood and sympathized, as much as any man could, the loss of a mate, there was no denying the duty that befell them both. There was a House to tend to and the people needed reassurance, though his own purpose in life might be gone.

"You must speak to the nobles," Vharhin said. "And to the generals."

"We must speak to them," Vhrakhar corrected.

Vharhin nodded, even as he accepted his mother's tearful embrace.

Events transpired quickly. As word spread of Fhirvhi's surrender, the conspirators turned themselves in en masse. As Vhrazhians, they could not function without their leader, nor could they stand against the clear moral supremacy of the Shodan and his family.

Tryla's self-sacrifice to save the life of the emperor went a long way in calming any latent hostility against Erth. Instead of seeking to mount an attack fleet, the military commanders were offering their support to Sonyago and his forces against the conspirators on Erth.

The conspiracy did not stand a chance.

Peace was secured.

Vharhin celebrated, from the outside looking in, a ghost gazing upon a world that had lost its color.

Some time later he found himself in a grieving chamber, shut away, the form of Tryla lying in repose before him.

Were he human, he might cry.

As a Vhrazhian, he must adapt. Learn from what had occurred, see it as a reality which shaped future responses.

Life without Tryla.

The embracing of an absurdity.

For the first time in his life he understood the despair that humans were famous for falling into. Such was the price of loving a human female.

Indeed he had loved her. If only he had better understood while she was alive. Their last time together, when she had regained her memory, sharing how much he had exasperated her was the happiest he had ever felt. She had aggravated him, too, and he was going to miss that as much as a man could miss anything.

In the final analysis, Tryla Numidia was the most noble creature he had ever known, human or Vhrazhian.

She had taught him as much about his own nature as hers.

Her life had been cut way too short and now he had to go on alone.

"Your Highness, forgive the intrusion," said the uniformed officer, bowing as he announced his sudden presence in the doorway.

Vharhin looked at him as if he were a million miles away. "Yes?"

"There is an urgent communication for you from Erth. From a human named Jonny G Pak."

Vharhin tensed. "What does he say?"

"He asks, do you have the package you brought with you? And if so, would you be averse to a little tinkering on his part, like he did with Sonyago?"

Vharhin rose to his feet, blood pounding in his head and heart. Tryla's memories. He did indeed have them, the ones from her childhood, leading up to her enlistment in the ErthSec Academy. But what could he possibly do with them? Jonny had used memory engrams to restore Sonyago into a new body. But Tryla was human, not android. How would he bring back a creature of flesh and blood? No matter, any chance was better than none.

"Do you have a reply?" the officer asked.

Vharhin already had Tryla in his arms, limp and lifeless. "Yes," he said moving to the door. "Tell him we are on the way."

Chapter Seventeen

"Please?" begged the pigtailed girl. "Please can't I go with you to the canyon, Mored?"

Mored, already tall and broad-chested at sixteen, growled in annoyance at his younger sister. "You're too young, Tryla, and you're a girl, besides."

"So what?" Tryla defied, hands on her hips. "Girls can shoot gangs just like boys."

"You wouldn't even be able to hit the side of a cargo rocket. Besides, Dad would kill me." Mored pulled the beam weapon from the wall of their residential dome. It was an ancient model, with genuine wooden stock and nickel plating. Tryla had been eying it for as long as she could remember.

Her great mission in life was to figure out how to take it down just like her big brother did.

Barring that, she would follow Mored to the end of the universe.

Frequently he would shoo her away.

"Look," said Mored, squatting down in front of her. "Why don't you go and play with your dollies? Or program up the servodroids to make some vegetables and potatoes to go with all the gamp meat I am going to bring home."

Tryla scowled. At times like this she really hated that Erth Colony Beta 675 was run by the Nukers, the sect of Erth society dedicated to living out the ideals of the twentieth-century nuclear family, complete with female subordination. She was only a child and even she knew it was foolish. Her Uncle Vorsin, a socio-anthropologist, agreed, though he had warned her to keep her opinions to herself.

"Dissent is not valued in wartime," he told her, "much as it might be needed."

"I don't want to play dollies. I want to train for the space marines, so I can fight like Garad."

Mored pursed his lips. He knew, like everyone else, how much she had worshipped their older brother. He and Father had had a knock-down, drag-out fight about his enlisting early. Father wanted him to complete more academic units, so he could go in as an officer at least.

"I cannot look at these stars one more day," the fiery-eyed, dark-haired Garad had thundered. "Knowing human blood is being shed up there. You sit in your classrooms and teach as long as you want. I am going to fight for my species."

"One must choose battles," said the bearded Gilidian, one of the foremost Erthologists in the sector. "What good is it to fight ill-equipped, to waste one's gifts?"

"I could think about my gifts until the end of time and I would never do a damn thing. The human race needs me. You and your colleagues will all be speaking Vhrazhian at this rate."

That night Garad had awoken Tryla. She was only five.

He put his finger to his lips, signaling for her to remain quiet. She sat up, rubbing her eyes. He was sitting at the edge of her bed, fully dressed. "Where are you going?" she whispered.

"To enlist, Tryla."

"But Father says to wait."

"Father isn't right about everything. You'll learn that one day."

"When will I see you again?"

He thinned his lips. Like Father, he never minced words or sugar-coated things for her. "I don't know. It might be a long time. Maybe never. A lot of men smarter and stronger than me have died in this war."

She threw herself into his arms. "I don't want you to go."

He stroked her hair. "I don't want to either. But I can't stay."

"I will miss you."

He smiled at her. "You will see me. Look at the stars. I will be there. Forever."

"Do you think there is a heaven?" she asked.

He laughed. "You're asking me? Father is the brain. I have no clue what happens. But I will probably find out."

Garad had blipped them a few times from training. They had received news of his commendations, awarded after a siege at a place called Black Ridge. A medal was sent from ErthDef Marine Headquarters, it was on the mantle beside the weapon.

Two officers had brought the medal. They wore shiny uniforms and had gleaming silver sidearms. They spoke to Father alone in his study and later he had spoken to Tryla and Mored.

"I miss Garad too," said Mored. "But you can't bring him back and you can't fight in the Marines. Now can I have a hug?"

"I don't want a hug," said Tryla. "I want to go with you."

Mored rose to his feet. He was harder now. They all were. Father seldom spoke. He spent much time alone in his study. Uncle Vorsin said he was grieving, that there was nothing harder than losing a son.

Tryla was sure there were worse things.

Like dying in battle.

She aimed to find out.

"My dollies don't want a hug either," she called out as Mored walked away, the weapon slung over his shoulder.

He walked with weight in his footsteps. He shrugged, barely glancing over his shoulder.

She would never see him again.

For the next hour she played space marine, shooting at the small lizards with her pretend energy rifle, fashioned from a fallen branch. Zigzagging between the trees in the backyard, a tiny oasis of green carefully cultivated in the dry climate. She let her mind run wild.

She was at Black Ridge, she was killing every Vhrazhian. She was avenging her brother. She was ending the war by killing every one of the enemy.

It was late afternoon when the sky erupted. The attack came from the west, beyond the canyon. Her father came running from their residence, panic and terror on his face.

"Tryla! Tryla! You must come with me!"

"What is it, Father?"

A single word escaped his lips. "Vhrazhians!"

Her little heart pounded. She clenched her fist around the stick. "I want to fight."

He scooped her up. "You are too little. You're a child. You have to survive." He ran with her, huffing and puffing. When was the last time he had exercised? "You will go to the shelter with the other children."

"You will be with me?"

"No, I can't, the adults have to remain outside. The Vhrazhians must not be suspicious, if they find no one here they will look for us."

The shelter was hidden beneath a rock, a carved chamber, lined with bomb-proof hyper-steel. A single adult had been appointed to watch over the children. She was an elderly lady with a kind face. Her name was Irinia.

Irinia took Tryla into her arms as Gilidian passed her down into the chamber through the opening.

"Father, no," she screamed. "I won't go!"

"You must. I love you, I always will." He slammed shut the reinforced trapdoor and after that she heard the rock being pushed over the opening. She struggled, trying to free herself from Irinia's arms, screaming to be released.

The explosions were coming closer. The ground shook around them. The other children were frightened. They huddled close, had a million questions.

"What's happening? Will we be all right?"

"Everything will be fine," Irinia assured them.

Tryla called her a liar. "It's not fine," she insisted. "The Vhrazhians are here. Everyone is going to die."

They were in the shelter more than a day before the tapping came from outside. Irinia and the children huddled in the corner, no weapons to protect them.

The logic was simple, if Erth forces freed them, they would have no need to defend themselves and if it was Vhrazhians they had no hope but complete surrender.

The suits of the soldiers were scarlet red.

"You are prisoners," said the leader. "Of the Empire of Vhrazhia."

"Where is my father?" demanded Tryla. "Where is my brother?"

A soldier scooped her up as she tried to attack the leader.

"This one has spunk," he said.

"Do not harm the children," begged Irinia.

The leader looked at her through alien, amber eyes. "We are not savages," he said.

The transport ship came for them a short while later. Tryla and the others were taken to a detention camp. They were treated well, though the food was strange and bitter. There were no games to play and the hours passed slow as molasses, mostly spent on their bunk beds.

After the prisoner exchange, the children were released. They were adopted separately. A kindly couple took Tryla. Their own sons had grown and gone off to war and they wanted to help in any way they could.

Tryla did not say much to them. She ran away twice, though their home was very nice. The people offering to take her became fewer and fewer over the years and she was labeled a troubled youth, red-carded for psychic trauma. The red card meant she could get away with more.

It was a joke. Everything passed in a blur, caring less and less. At age twenty she achieved majority, which meant it was the Peace Patrol picking her up for joy-riding in a stolen air car and not the Youth Superintendent's Office.

One of the peace men must have seen something in her — maybe it was her left hook or the way she kicked his partner to the ground. He put in a call to ErthSec, which was looking for rule benders, agents who could think for themselves and play as dirty as the bad guys.

"You gotta be kidding me," Tryla had said as the boigurl android walked into the detention room. "What are you supposed to be, my lawyer?"

"No," said the male voice she would come to know as Yago. "We're your salvation. Assuming you want something for your life other than hard time on a prison planet."

"You should listen," soothed the female voice of Sonya. "We mean you no harm."

"What the hell," she quipped. "It's not like I'm going anywhere."

"That's the spirit," said Yago.

The next morning she was on her way to the Academy.

They took her to an office, got her electronic signature on a million releases. Then they talked to her about taking her memories. Would she be willing to let go of her past?

She laughed in their faces. "Take it. There's nothing in it for me."

"When you wake up," they said, "you will be right here but you won't remember. The procedure is very simple."

Everything went dark as soon as the needle beam hit her skull.

It did last only a second but they were wrong. When she woke up she was in somebody's crappy warehouse – or maybe a laboratory.

A man was standing over her, sort of a man. His hair was blue-green and he was thin as a rail. He looked like he was hopped up on megacaff, eyes glassy as marbles.

"Who the hell are you?" She tried to sit up and was immediately overcome with pain and a profound heaviness in her limbs.

There were straps on her wrists and ankles. She was on some kind of operating table. "What is this? Where's the office? Where's that freaky boigurl android?"

"Take it easy," the man said, administering a hypodermic to calm her. "You've been on quite a trip. I'm Jonny G Pak, by the way."

"I was at ErthSec," she said, blinking against the harsh light.

He grinned at her, manic satisfaction on his face. "Actually, Tryla, you were dead. I brought you back."

* * * * *

Vharhin paced the floor of the parking garage. How long was this going to take? Tryla should have been resuscitated by now. Had the procedure not worked? Jonny had told him the risks, manifold possibilities for failure. Tryla's body would have to be reanimated, her heart started, the damage to the physical brain repaired. Then they would have to energize the proper nerve endings, feed her the engrams, a million tiny threads to be interwoven, making her the Tryla she once was.

The Tryla who had existed prior to beginning her training at the Academy. What would she make of things when she woke up? Would she be ready to go on with her life, picking up where she had left off years ago or would the existence of all those blank spots in her life drive her mad?

Certainly she had been living this way for a while, having memories taken on a regular basis, but then again she had never died and come back to life before.

Vharhin would help her through anything but if she was unable to recognize him how could she trust him? There was no coaxing her memory back this time. It was well and truly gone.

He would be a stranger once more and without the excuse of a mission to perform together, how would he ever get to rekindle their romance?

The important thing was that she lived. If she did not ever accept him, at least she would have a chance at a fresh start. She would do wonderful things.

The door was opening. The metal creaked. Jonny popped his colorful head through the opening. "She is back with us," he said.

Vharhin's heart soared. This was the good news he needed, the restoration of balance to his soul. Hope from tragedy. "Everything went well?"

"As well as could be expected," he said guardedly.

"I want to see her."

"I don't know if she's ready."

"Do you think it will get easier?" asked Vharhin.

"No, I suppose not."

Jonny led him inside. "She is rather upset at the moment. She doesn't know what to make of what I have told her."

"How much did you tell her?"

"Everything."

Vharhin found her strapped down. She was applying her full strength, vigorously attempting to free herself. His heart skipped a beat at the sight of her. "Tryla..."

She glared at him, eyes narrowing. "Who are you? Or should I say what are you?"

"He's the Vhrazhian I told you about," said Jonny. "You and he are in love."

"You are insane," declared Tryla, pulling wildly. "And you, whatever you are," she turned to Vharhin. "You're not welcome in my sight!"

"I am Vharhin, son of the emperor. Your mate."

"No." She shook her head. "That isn't possible. You're both insane. I don't know how I got here but I have rights. Is this part of the ErthSec recruitment, because if it is, I want to go back to detention."

Jonny administered a puncture hypo to her arm. She drew a sharp breath and promptly lost consciousness.

"This is going to be difficult," said Jonny, making the understatement of the year.

Vharhin frowned. He knew there was only one option. "I must go," he said. "When she wakes, I must be nothing more than a remembered dream."

"Surely you won't give her up that easily?"

"I am not giving up. I am saving her sanity." Vharhin had never made a more difficult choice in his life or a more heartbreaking one. "I should not have even risked this. When she comes to, you will not mention me again."

"If that is what you want."

"It is what must be."

Jonny extended his hand. "It was an honor to know you. You are one of the most human people I know...and you aren't even human."

"And you are one of the least Vhrazhian of beings I have ever met." Vharhin grinned, regarding the unkempt, wild scientist so full of passion and imagination. "And that is a compliment, trust me."

Vharhin took the air car back to the Embassy. It was strange to travel alone. He had gotten quite accustomed to her by his side. No one would ever challenge him like that again or give him so much joy.

Nazhlan was waiting for him. Now that Vharhin's identity was known, he was quick to initiate a full royal bow.

Vharhin dismissed the attempt. "Not now," he said. "Not here."

The newly appointed ambassador thinned his lips in disapproval. "His Highness has taxed himself in his journey," he offered in subtle rebuke.

"What I have been through is nothing," Vharhin said. "Compared to the suffering of others."

Nazhlan nodded. "I assume your job is done here, Your Highness?"

"Yes. I will return to the home world presently."

Every single one of the Erth conspirators had been rounded up. By mutual agreement, they would stand trial with the traitors from Vhrazhia under the auspices of a tribunal composed of members of both races. It would mark a new chapter of cooperation between the two mighty powers.

"We shall endeavor to keep discipline here," said Nazhlan. "I hope Your Highness will grace us with His presence another time?"

"Yes, perhaps." In truth he could not bear to ever lay eyes upon Tryla's world again. There were too many memories here, all of them bittersweet. A part of him would stay here with those memories. Would the rest of him be enough—enough to return home and continue his preparations to one day rule in his father's stead?

"I hope the new court will be lenient on my predecessor and his mate," Nazhlan said.

Vharhin watched a d'areesh bird soar above in the amber sky, beneath the small dome, his people's hideaway on Erth. Was it right to cloister themselves so? Perhaps he would order the dome opened, that Nazhlan and the others might learn to live under the sun of Erth.

"I am sure they will act rightly," said Vharhin. "The ambassador's guilt was a matter of his personal imbalance, not political treachery. Even his sahvria was motivated more by love than racial vengeance."

"Your words show much mercy, Your Highness" said Nazhlan. "Is that not sometimes perceived as weakness?"

"It could be," Vharhin said, wondering if the seeds of another conspiracy were already being planted. "Then again, the strongest creatures in nature seldom flaunt their cruel powers to excess. The mirkya burns its foes but once a month, yet all in its proximity live in terror day by day."

Nazhlan inclined his head, quickly, rapidly. "As you say, Highness."

Vharhin had nothing more to say.

It was time to transport home.

A lifetime of survival lay ahead as he sought to eke an existence from the desert bowl that had become his soul.

A soul defined by separation from its other half.

A half that would never know him.

Chapter Eighteen

Tryla did not resume her work at ErthSec. As far as she was concerned she had never been an agent in the first place. It had taken some time to fully accept the truth. Chronometers shoved in her face, blip journals detailing missed history, missed years of her own life.

It was so hard to believe.

The war had actually ended. There had been a treaty and some kind of huge memorial to honor the dead of both sides. She had supposedly gone, though according to Sonyago she had not shed a tear.

How could she when she had not known the names of her family? Now she did and the tears came, long overdue. It was not fair. She should not have survived that Vhrazhian attack.

In many ways she hadn't.

After all, had she not lived a childhood drifting from home to home, at best an annoyance to her foster caretakers?

And then there had been her so-called career as an ErthSec agent.

It seemed the height of absurdity to her that she could have functioned that whole time with no knowledge of her past, not even of the cases she had closed the week before.

For hours she stared at the holofiles, studying the images of herself, the accounts of her exploits and it might as well have been the tale of a complete stranger.

What kind of life was this to lead, having to continuously bargain, trading one part of her memory for another?

Once she been an agent with no childhood. Now she was an overgrown child with no present.

At no time had she ever had a future.

One of the things Tryla did was to visit her birthplace. The remains of Erth Colony Beta 675. Unlike most of the other colonies, it had not been rebuilt. The scars of the heat beams could still be seen, along with the underground chamber where she had hidden with the other children.

The colony's buildings had been devastated in the attack. A monument had been erected, from the twisted pieces of metal. A common grave marked the bodies of the dead. Most were in the form of ashes and shattered bones.

She remembered the faces of the Vhrazhians. For years afterward she had seen them in her nightmares. All that had been extricated by the memsweep, pulled out like a bad tooth but now it was back.

We are not savages.

One of the Vhrazhians had told her that. What were they then, those merciless killers from the sky?

Tryla decided to become a historian of the war and its causes.

Not surprisingly she learned the story was more complex than it had appeared on the surface. The Vhrazhian attack on her colony had not occurred in a vacuum. There was a tragic set of causes and effects behind it, traceable all the way back to a disputed incident on a far-off Vhrazhian world.

An Erth fleet had shown up out of the blue. Its commanders claimed they were answering a call from certain elements of the Vhrazhian population to liberate an oppressed people from a corrupt, sexist empire. Many Vhrazhians had died. There was no liberty, no joy.

Predictably, the Vhrazhian colonists turned to their home world for help. The proud and ancient forces of the Shodan struck back, decimating Erth Colony 56 in retaliation. This in turn led to the mobilization of the whole of the Erth Federation. Within a few solar months, gigantic fleets were trading barrages across the vacuum of space. Casualties mounted and mounted and mounted.

As inevitably happens in war, causes and justifications were added, some real, some specious. Supposedly Vhrazhians kept women as slaves. She had been taught that. They had killed her family and destroyed everything she knew. But the memories clung to her loosely now, they belonged as much to her people, to the universe itself, as to her.

Tryla received top marks in her studies. She even had time to make a hobby of studying archaic Erth practices and dialects, something she supposedly had enjoyed before.

Offers had come in already, for her to teach.

She enjoyed the interactions and discussions but something was missing.

She called Sonyago one day, asking for a meeting.

"You will overfeed them," said Yago, finding her on a park bench in the Green Zone tossing energy nuggets to a group of clamoring robo squirrels.

"It's not like they can get fat," said Tryla.

"True," said the android, sitting next to her. "So what's on your mind, my dear?"

"Is it really true?"

"Is what true?"

"Was I saved by a Vhrazhian? Did the emperor's son bring me back to life with the help of an Erth scientist?"

"We didn't realize you knew that," said Yago.

"His name was Jonny G Pak." She recalled the events when she woke in the laboratory. "He told me this whole story about me working on a case with a Vhrazhian and falling in love with him. He was the prince and he made me his mate. For a long time I thought I had dreamt the conversation."

"You did not dream it," said Sonya, the android's head revolving to reveal her face. "The question is, what do you do with the information."

Tryla threw another nugget. "What can I do? If I loved him then I don't now and he must surely have moved on as well."

"What if you saw him?" Sonya wanted to know.

Tryla shook her head. "It might only cause trouble. He has probably entered into some political match or other. Better to move on."

"You haven't though, have you?"

"I have dated a few times." The lackluster tone of her answer reflected well the quality of those encounters. The men were utterly uninteresting, simplistic, interested in simple, mindless sex or else wrapped up in one silly hobby or another.

Where was the one who could seize her imagination?

"Has a man taken you since Vharhin?"

The wording made Tryla's toes curl. "Erthwomen aren't taken."

"You were."

Tryla was silent.

"Have you seen his holoimage?" Sonya asked softly.

"Yes," she acknowledged.

She had done more than look at it, she had set it hovering above her bed in plain sight while she touched her nude body, trying to imagine what a male like that could do to her.

She had orgasmed again and again, caressing her nipples, sliding her fingers in and out of her pussy.

"There have been studies on the effects of Vhrazhian male pheromones on human females," said Tryla.

"Yes," said Sonya.

"The results are mixed. Some women become as captivated as Vhrazhian females. Others are rendered submissive only during sex."

Sonya touched her hand to Tryla's, android synthetics pressing to human skin.

It really was possible, thought Tryla, for emotion to be conveyed between beings of very different kinds.

"I am sorry you do not remember Vharhin making love to you."

Tryla smiled thinly. "Sex is sex."

It wasn't though. She could feel things deep inside when she looked at Vharhin's picture. There was a taste he had on his lips, like rum. It wasn't possible to remember such things, was it? Could it be his pheromones had stuck with her in a place too deep to be erased, a place stronger than life or death?

"There is an exchange program coming up," said Sonya. "You should go."

Tryla's pulse quickened. "To Vhrazhia?"

"You must see him," she said. "You must resolve the question in your mind."

"I have no question," she said firmly. "Nor do I owe him anything. He did what he did for sake of interplanetary relations. Frankly, he didn't do me any favors bringing me back, broken as I am."

"It is love that makes us broken," said Sonya with a surprisingly human smile. "And only love can make us whole."

"I won't go," said Tryla. "Anything that came of this trip would probably only end up forgotten like everything else in my life, anyhow."

"Tryla." It was Yago speaking this time. "Self-pity does not suit you."

"I'm realistic, that's all."

"The Tryla we know is never realistic. She looks for battles to fight."

"What should I do?" she said sharply. "Go to Vhrazhia and pick a fight with the Shahar Shodan?"

"If that is what it takes."

She shook her head. "You're both crazy."

"Tell us you have nothing to say to him and we will let the matter drop."

Tryla frowned. "I don't. Although, if I did talk to him, I would ask why he bothered bringing me back only to dump me off like an antique sack of potatoes."

"That's our girl," chimed Sonya. "We will sign you up at once."

"You'll be sorry," she muttered. "When I start another interplanetary war."

* * * * *

Vharhin had been asked to address the new group of exchange students from Erth. The request had come directly from Chief Sonyago. Such a thing would have been unthinkable before, but things were changing fast on Vhrazhia.

Already he had shown his face to the people, the first Shahar Shodan to do so. He had also offered a special invitation for dialogue, a chance for citizens at all levels, male and female alike to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their society.

All of this had been done with the approval of his father. Change was in the air. Vharhin had discovered many things on Erth, some of them disturbing, others intriguing. Above all he had learned that there is never only one way to do things.

As far as speaking to human scholars anxious to learn the ways and views of his own people, he felt an unusual amount of trepidation and imbalance, due to his own memories, his own lost dreams.

When he first saw the woman in the second row, he thought it was his mind playing tricks. How could Tryla end up here, out of all the billions and billions of humans?

But it was her. There was no mistaking the thick mane of hair, the piercing eyes, not to mention the concentration on her face, the narrowness of the gaze as she homed in on his every word, weighing them, taking nothing at face value. There was clarity there too, indicating she was open to learning.

How could it be that this victim of the war had come to the enemy to hear their side, to see their cities and study their way of life?

He wanted to tell her who he was.

He wanted to scream his identity. Fighting the near erection in his trousers, he stuck to his script, droning on about his new plan for a planet-wide dialogue on change.

Her skepticism was written all over her beautiful face. At last, she asked a question.

She was more gorgeous than ever in a teal tunic and stockings, short black skirt and high black boots. Not at all the deadly agent, hell bent on killing him at every turn.

Not that he would ever take her for a pushover, personally or professionally.

She had loved him.

"Your Highness, you have made some very bold statements today but how do we know you will be able to keep your word?"

His heart thudded in his chest.

The way she was looking at him, the brashness of her question almost suggested personal acquaintance.

Could it be she had managed to remember something of him or had someone told her of the role he'd played in her life?

"A Vhrazhian would sooner die than break a commitment. The dialogue process I speak of will be difficult. It will meet with resistance and I cannot say the results it will achieve but that is the fruit of democracy."

"And what of personal commitments?"

"I do not see the connection," he said.

His blood raced as he watched her moving lips—full and pouting. It was all he could do keep from leaping over the first row and crushing her in his embrace.

"If a Vhrazhian makes a woman his mate that is permanent, is it not?"

Vharhin's heart skipped a beat.

She knows.

"Under most circumstances, yes."

"Most circumstances?" She arched a brow. "Are you giving us loopholes already?"

The program chaperone, a bearded professor from Erth University Seven, rose nervously to his feet. "Perhaps this would be a good time to conclude our questioning."

"I'm sure the prince would like to finish with me first," said Tryla.

Vharhin clenched his fists. He would like to finish with her, all right. What game was she playing? If she desired an audience it could certainly have been arranged.

"I would be delighted," he said, smiling broadly. "In private."

"An excellent idea," said Professor Harkell. "Perhaps your secretary will arrange a time in the future."

"Now would be fine."

The professor was unable to hide his surprise. "Yes...of course."

"I think not," Tryla spoke up. "I have other things to do."

"You seemed anxious for me to answer your question," Vharhin said.

"I changed my mind."

Her cool, aloof demeanor was like fire poured on his libido. More than ever he wanted her back under his power, naked, moaning, begging.

"It would please me to speak with you," he said.

"We don't always get what we want," she replied with a toss of her hair. "Do we?"

How well he remembered those dark locks, the way it felt to run his fingers through them, to grasp them, pulling tightly until she moaned with need.

"Have you any idea how impolite you are being, and to the Shahar Shodan, no less," Professor Harkell intoned.

"He's a big boy, he can take it."

The other students filed out of the room, sensing a confrontation.

"Leave us," said Vharhin to Professor Harkell. "Please."

"Better do what he says before he smites you," Tryla chimed. "He takes his role as pseudo-god pretty seriously."

"You and I are taking a ride," Vharhin said when they were alone.

"I don't think so," she said. "And if you try to force me you will have one huge diplomatic incident on your hands, not to mention a black eye."

"There was a time you would have gone anywhere I said."

"I've grown up since then."

"Or lost your way, more like."

Tryla rose from her seat. He could not keep his eyes off her legs under that short skirt. How well he remembered running his hands over her flesh, feeling out her curves and making her body sing. It was all he had thought about aside from the politics.

If she only knew how hard it had been to leave her. He would have done anything to keep her. He had made the right choice, though. The fact that she was here now — happy, healthy, fighting — was sure proof of her recovery.

"You'd like to have me, wouldn't you?" she said.

He ground his teeth at her insolence. "A Vhrazhian woman would be punished for flaunting herself so."

She moved down the aisle and stood before him, mere centimeters from his face. "I'm not Vhrazhian, though. I guess that's why you cut me out of your life like you did. Don't worry, though, I don't remember a thing about you. I couldn't miss you any more than I could a mosquito buzzing in my face."

"You don't mean to say these things."

Her eyes flashed. "You a fucking mind reader, too? No wonder everyone here has to worship you. Too bad I'm a human with a mind of my own."

He saw her nipples tighten under the teal top. Below her firm belly, under that short skirt, she was wet. He could smell it in the air.

"If I do what you really want, Erthwoman, you will be sorry," he growled.

"Oh." She arched a provocative brow. One sweep of his hand about her waist and their bodies would be fused. "And what is it I want?"

"You want me to take away the agony of choice you Erthlings have to live with. You want me to make you give in to your desires. You want to be fucked, Tryla Numidia, harder than you have ever been fucked in your life."

"That's some pretty coarse talk," she said. "For a crown prince."

"You don't deny it, then?"

"No, I just choose not to dignify it with an answer."

"You traveled an awful long way to be so coy with me."

"I'm not here for you at all. You had your chance and apparently I wasn't worth your time."

"I let you go so you could have a normal life. Trying to deal with me would have overwhelmed you."

"I guess you would know," she said sarcastically. "You're the male."

"You think it doesn't tear me up inside each and every day?" He was on the verge of emotion. That was no place for the Shahar Shodan to be.

"You seem just fine, lecturing away about democratic dialogues."

"I am not fine. You haunt my dreams. And now you are back in my reality."

"Such an inconvenience. I really should learn to stay disposed of."

"One kiss and it would begin again."

She laughed. The sound was sadder than he remembered, more complicated. "I'm not the same person, Vharhin. The part of me that fell for you is gone. What you see instead is the product of an upbringing that made me hate your kind."

"You have passed that stage or else you would not be here."

"I can tolerate your race, I can study you but I will never love you."

The words struck like a knife plunged into his gut. "Now who is the cruel abandoner, Tryla?"

"Payback is a bitch."

It was his turn to laugh.

"What's so damn funny?"

"That must be one of your old Erth expressions. I do miss them so."

"Goodbye, Vharhin...and good riddance."

He grasped her arm as she turned away.

"Let go of me," she said.

"I told you, we are taking a ride together."

"Over my dead body. Wait, I forgot, you already took that route."

"Most people would be grateful to a person who saved their life," he pointed out.

"You want me to kneel?" She practically spat venom. "Shall I show you what a happy little slave I can be?"

"I could have you detained, you know. I could make you go wherever I wish."

"You're hurting my arm," she said, though she did not appear in great distress.

He released her nonetheless.

"Go on," he said. "If you are that afraid of me."

Her eyes flashed with indignation. "I am not afraid of you."

"Then ride with me," he pressed. "There is something I wish to show you."

She considered. "If I do, you must promise never to try to contact me again."

"It is not I who initiated contact this time."

She frowned. "You know what I mean. This is about closure. I want the loose ends tied up in my life."

"Is that what I am?"

She was silent.

"I will tell you this," he said, absorbing this latest remark. "If you have come, out of some misguided need for revenge, you may rest assured that you are hitting your target."

She pursed her lips. "I thought Vhrazhians did not admit when they had been wounded?"

"Perhaps there is more to us than can be learned in your Erth textbooks, Tryla."

With that he headed for the door, leaving it to her to follow...or not.

* * * * *

The Vhrazhian horse had wings, just like Pegasus in the ancient legend. It was a beautiful animal, white as snow, with eyes that were black as coal. Tryla fell in love with the beast immediately.

She was less enamored of having Vharhin hoist her up onto the saddle, his hands gripping her waist. She knew logically that he must have held her like that before and presumably she had enjoyed it.

In the present context, however, it only made her angry, at herself and at him. She should never have come here. What did she hope to prove, except to see in person the dynamic figure who had been haunting her dreams?

Did she want him to touch her, take her even? Of course she did. She was a woman and he was an incredibly dynamic male from a race known for their powers to entrance the female libido.

"Easy, boy." Vharhin soothed the mount as Tryla settled on the dark saddle. It was a very bad day to have worn such a short skirt.

What had she been thinking, dressing so as to tease Vharhin? The only one paying now would be her.

Her cheeks remained flushed, as they had been since he'd first mentioned fucking her. She was going to have to be careful not to squirm on the saddle. And stray motions would cause potentially dangerous friction against her clitoris.

Vharhin waited a moment before climbing up in front of her. "Hold tight," he said.

She considered disobeying but thought better of it after he dug in his heels, causing the horse to take off at a gallop.

Gasping, nearly falling to the ground, she wrapped her arms tightly about his chest.

The sensation was not unpleasant.

Was this what it had been like to feel safe and secure in Vharhin's presence? She could see the appeal.

The horse spread its massive wings and launched them from the ground of the royal stables into the air. After making a few tight circles, ascending ever upward, Tryla was able to look down and see the palace grounds in their entirety.

The lecture hall where Vharhin had first spoken to her group was in the east wing of the palace, right behind the residential quarters.

She wondered how much time she had spent in that place and in what capacity. From what she knew of Vhrazhians and their mates she must surely have been in bed much of the time.

In her erotic fantasies she was sometimes in bondage. Vharhin would use her helplessness as an occasion to take his pleasure from her as he wished and to stretch out the time of their sessions.

"That is the old city." He pointed to a series of domes made of dark, sandstone material. They were connected by a network of streets that were inlaid with crystals. Here and there were mosaics, enormous figures of birds and reptiles and ancient

warriors with various weapons. "Some of these structures are older than your species," he said.

Tryla settled in and rested her cheek against his back. She liked to hear him talk, pride and excitement in his voice as he spoke of his native world.

He was not as arrogant as he had seemed when he was lecturing about changing his planet. She saw him now as a man aware of his place in a very long line of leaders, each of whom had the Empire and its traditions to answer to.

She wondered where he could be taking her, glad she had stopped fighting him on this. If things between them had to end this was a good note to do it on.

And of course, she did want them to end. What other option was there?

Behind them the Vhrazhian sun was setting. Its heat burnt her back through her clothes in the same way the heat of his skin burnt her front. Such a passionate world, she thought, a world of extremes.

The air cooled quickly as it grew dark. Stars appeared in a pattern wholly unfamiliar. The buildings thinned out beneath them, the grid of the city giving way to a wide expanse of desert composed of rusty-colored sand.

There were dunes as tall as an Erth building and plunging valleys as deep as a lake. Here and there she saw cacti shaped like trees with hanging spindly needles and blossoms of impossibly beautiful flowers. Small, spiderlike creatures scuttled to and fro over the expanse, stopping here and there to engage in concourse with one another.

Lovemaking, perhaps, or was it battle?

Looking up she wondered at the Vhrazhian constellations, those imaginary lines connecting star dots into figures from his people's history, chronicling their aspirations and fears.

All in all, she found the open spaces awe-inspiring. So different from Erth with its tightly packed, ever-expanding masses.

Speaking of which, could she be sidling any closer to Vharhin right now? Something flashed in her mind—an image of her father and brothers. She stiffened, feeling as if she were betraying them by being here.

Vharhin pulled on the reins, causing the horse to veer left. In a few moments they were circling downward.

"This is what I wanted to show you," he said. "This is a place sacred to my family."

Tryla saw nothing below her but open desert. Puzzled, she waited for them to land.

Vharhin dismounted first, his skin illuminated by the pale, flat disk of the Vhrazhian moon. Sombre-faced, he reached out his hands, beckoning.

She nearly fell against him, her muscles completely useless.

He quickly cradled her in his arms. Her mind told her to fight but her body was telling her mind to be quiet.

"This is it," he said, carrying her to the edge of a crater that was some twenty meters across.

"I don't understand," she said, not wanting to offend him.

"This is the resting place of my ancestors."

She could not have been more shocked. The textbooks had prepared her for nothing such as this. "But what of the Great Vhrazhian Pyramids?"

He smiled wistfully. "Ah, yes. How does the poem go? 'The Pyramids, that fabled sea of mountain carved majesty sprung from desert sand, ten thousand times ten, unending, eternal.'"

Tryla knew the poem. It was over a hundred thousand years old.

"The Pyramids are the sacred resting place of a Shodan's public being," Vharhin explained. "All the trappings of his office are placed therein, all that made him appear to be what he was. But the rest, the bones and flesh are laid here. There are no markers, no distinction generation to generation. We are taken by the sand, we are returned to oblivion."

Tryla felt the loneliness, the timeless pain of his words. If this prince and his predecessors were monsters then so was every living being in the universe who strived to survive while protecting its own.

I have understood nothing, she thought. "Vharhin," she whispered, choking back tears. "I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for."

"Neither do you," she replied.

He sighed deeply. "I had a younger brother who was lost in the war. He was a star pilot, as I am. But I was not allowed to go, for I am Shahar Shodan."

"My family has no gravestones, either." After a moment she asked. "Do you believe there is any life after this one?"

"I do not know. If so, perhaps, in the cosmic dust, our families have met one another," he speculated.

"I hope so," she whispered.

Vharhin set her down so he could kiss her. She did not object. Standing on tiptoe in the sand, she angled her neck. He captured her lips. The taste was oddly familiar, just as she imagined it would be.

It wasn't rum, though, but something else. A new flavor she could never have identified in her former life.

Vharhin tasted of his planet. He tasted of Vhrazhia itself.

"You do not know me," he reminded, releasing her.

"Then teach me..."

His second kiss took away her breath and all the pain. He crushed her against him and this time she did not want him to let go. Not now and maybe not ever.

"Take me," she whispered, running her fingers over his powerful chest.

He held her at bay for the moment. "Tryla, you are aware of the pheromones."

"Yes," she said. "I have studied them to death."

"I don't want to overpower you with chemicals."

"You never did before, did you?"

"No," he admitted. "It did not seem so."

"Then stop worrying," she chided. "Or is it something else? Would it be disrespectful to make love so close to your ancestors?"

Vharhin laughed. "I doubt I would be the first to bring a mate here."

She arched a brow. "Your ancestors must be as kinky as I am."

"It is our belief that the past Shodans and Shodanas speak through current counterparts. Perhaps your voice is not fully your own."

"It certainly feels like my own." Tryla busied herself unfastening his trousers.

"What do you think you are doing?"

"I am going to find out if this cock of yours is all it's cracked up to be."

"I never heard any complaints from you," he teased.

"I have a feeling you will take full advantage of my missing memory, won't you?"

His cock sprung free of its containment. She grasped it with her fingers, squeezing tightly.

"I have no idea what you are talking about," he said.

"Yes, you do, but I don't care."

For she realized now she did not need her memories to connect to Prince Vharhin. His voice was convincing enough...and his presence.

She had a funny feeling he was right about the connection to the past, too. They had been here many times—many lives—and they would go through many more.

"I have only one question," she said as she ran her hand slowly up and down his shaft.

His voice lowered to a near groan. "What is that, Tryla?"

"Did I ever let you drive my air car?"

"Yes," he said, rather pleased with himself. "As a matter of fact you did."

"Consider it a lapse of judgment. It won't happen again."

"Duly noted. Anything else?"

"Yes. If you ever let me die again, I won't be so forgiving."

Vharhin grinned. Before she could say another word he reached behind her and slid his hands up underneath her skirt.

"I thought Erthwomen stopped wearing panties a century ago," he complained feeling her silk-covered derriere.

"I'm an old-fashioned gal. You ought to know that."

"I will reimburse you the cost of these," he said, promptly shredding the panties from her quivering flesh.

She gasped as he lifted her onto his cock. She received him in a single thrust—wet, willing and out of her mind with desire.

"Don't bother. I only wore them to tease you," she confessed.

"You are an evil woman."

"Thank you."

Vharhin growled low in his throat as she wrapped her legs around him. "You are fond of doing that," he informed her.

"Am I?"

"Among other things."

"What about this?" She bit down on his neck. Vharhin released a roar, his muscles tensing. She felt his cock thickening inside her. "I'm going to come," she cried.

"Come, then. Climax for me."

She did so, molding her body to his, the currents ripping through them, dissolving their separate existences. It was the sealing of two worlds, two souls, two destinies.

"My Shodan," she whispered in the wake of the storm as they collapsed on the sand, limbs twisted.

"My Shodana," he replied, pulling her close against him—home, where she belonged now and forever.

Epilogue

Vharhin had never seen a sight so devastatingly beautiful in all his life.

His chosen one, his Tryla in all her mating ceremony regalia. The gown was five thousand years old, painstakingly restored using the skills of a hundred court seamstresses and gemologists.

The colors gleamed so brightly one could barely behold the garment with the naked eye. Empires might rise and fall in the quest of such exquisite tailoring.

Still, it was a rag in comparison to its wearer. Tryla's eyes were the real gems, her lips the true source of passion and wealth.

He yearned to touch her pale skin, to take hold of those elegant dark tresses.

Soon enough, he thought, they would be alone once more.

The trumpets blared as she entered the chamber. The body of guests, over a thousand nobles and dignitaries from a dozen worlds, stood as one.

Tryla looked a bit nervous at first. Then she caught his eye and he saw her calm instantly. Vharhin squared his shoulders. She was his woman and he would protect her always, keeping her from all danger and anxiety.

"You have done well," said Vhrakhar, standing beside his son in full military dress, the white uniform which represented his position as commander of the fleet.

"Fortune favored me," he answered his father.

"The same is true of myself," he said, putting his hand on Vharhin's shoulder. "I could not ask for a better Shodana or for a better son and daughter-in-law."

Vharhin looked at his mother in the front row, attended to by her ladies-in-waiting. He could see the tears in her eyes, the obvious pride in her stance as she anticipated the procession of the bride.

Sonyago would do the honors of leading Tryla down the petal-strewn aisle. The android looked quite distinguished wearing a combination suit and dress outfit befitting their split personality.

Ananke and Jonny G Pak gave Vharhin a thumbs-up from the audience. A bit unorthodox but appreciated none the less.

Vharhin tried to remember to breathe as Tryla approached, step by step. All across the Empire citizens were watching and on Erth, too, thanks to holocameras installed throughout the massive domed chamber.

"This is it," whispered Vhrakhar.

Vharhin took a step to the side and extended his hand.

Tryla's smile was ear to ear. He sighed with relief and took her hand. It was real now, nothing would get in the way.

"Hear ye, hear ye," declared the high priest. "We come into this place in the sight of our ancestors to unite this male and this female..."

Vharhin tensed, anticipating the next words. Ordinarily the priest would say "two Vhrazhians destined to become one".

"Two beings," he proclaimed instead. "One human and one Vhrazhian destined to become one, greater than the sum of the parts. May our worlds unite in celebration."

The cheer arose, though the vows had yet to be recited. Tryla squeezed his hand tightly.

They looked at one another now for the final time as single beings.

Soon a new chapter would begin, for them personally and for their planets as well.

"I love you, Sherlock," she whispered.

He gasped. Where had that come from?

"You remember," he said. "But how?"

"I don't know," she replied. "Do you believe in magic?"

"Yes," he said quite earnestly. "From the moment I laid eyes on you."

"Recite after me," said the high priest, placing his hand on each of their foreheads.

Vharhin recited his pledge and heard hers, though his mind was already in the future, thinking of the things he would do to her.

She was his princess, his lover, his mate.

His sahvria forever and ever.

About the Author

Reese Gabriel is a born romantic with a taste for the edgier side of love. Having traveled the world and sampled many of the finer things, Reese now enjoys the greater simplicities; barefoot walks by the ocean, kisses under moonlight and whispers of passion in the darkness with that one special person.

Preferring to remain behind the scenes, cherished by a precious few, Reese hopes to awaken in the lives of many the possibilities of true love through stories of far off places and enchanted lives.

For the sake of love and hope and imagination, these stories are told. May they be enjoyed as much in the reading of them as in the writing.

Reese welcomes comments from readers. You can find Reese's website and email address on the author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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